HISTORY IN THE THEOLOGICAL METHOD OF REINHOLD NIEBUHR

A study of the relationship between
past and contemporary event
in Niebuhr's theological method.

REINHOLD NIEBUHR

by

James V. Leatt

B.A. Rhodes University, Grahamstown (1965)
B.A. (Hons) University of Cape Town (1968)

Presented in fulfillment of the
requirements for the degree of
Doctor of Philosophy in the Faculty
of Arts at the University of Cape Town.

September, 1973.

Supervisor of Studies: Professor J.S. Cumpsty.

T O

J E N N Y

C H R I S T O P H E R

A N D

A N N - M A R I E

PREFACE

Reinhold Niebuhr is widely acknowledged, by religious and secular opinion alike, as the most influential Christian social ethicist of the twentieth century. For over fifty years he grappled with the issues which confronted his native America at a time when that nation was undergoing the most dramatic period of change in its history. During this time there was considerable debate about method in Christian ethics, but with little or no success.

By contrast Niebuhr hardly seems to have a method, but perhaps behind his considerable success lies hidden a method which must be made explicit for the contemporary debate in Christian ethics.

Since we have summarized our argument at the beginning of each chapter, it is necessary here only to indicate the main outline of this thesis. The contemporary debate in Christian ethics forms the subject of our first chapter, and states the problem with which this work is concerned. We then examine the formative context of Reinhold Niebuhr's life and work, before giving an exposition and critique of his Christian realism. The last two chapters seek to elucidate the theological method of Reinhold Niebuhr, and to offer an evaluation and critique.

I stand in the William James tradition. He was both an empiricist and a religious man, and his faith was both the consequence and the presupposition of his pragmatism - REINHOLD NIEBUHR

ACKNOWLEDGEMENTS

The preparation and writing of this thesis has spanned four years during which time I have received help and encouragement from a great number of people who, in one way or another, have made the project possible. Though many will have to remain annonymous, and none can be held responsible for the results, my debt to them all is considerable.

Though I hardly know how, I want to express my appreciation for the help, criticism, and encouragement that I have received from Professor John Cumpsty. He combines theological perception with the resources of an academic background which includes science, law, and business-school training. As my supervisor he has probed and questioned in a searching and therefore helpful way. While he cannot be held responsible for the errors I have undoubtedly made, they would have been considerably greater in number and consequence without his help when this thesis was taking shape and final form. Had he not placed at my disposal his considerable library on Reinhold Niebuhr, and related resources, this project would have been impossible since such resources are not readily available in South Africa. The past four years have seen the establishment and subsequent growth of the Department of Religious Studies at the University of Cape Town under the guidance of Prof. Cumpsty, nevertheless he has spared no effort to make time for me.

I am grateful to my colleagues in the team ministry of the Inner City Methodist Mission, and especially to Rev. Trevour de Bruyn for shouldering added responsibilities in the final stages of preparation. I express my very deep appreciation to Ruth and Trevour who gave me time to write; to my in-laws and friends whose financial assistance eased an overloaded expense account; and to George Lumb for the printing of this thesis.

Mrs Gloria Hare, Mrs Ethel Lennox, and Miss Margie Broster worked miracles in turning my rough draft into its present form in the face of a deadline which I cut too fine. Thank you for so willingly doing this, whilst carrying other important responsibilities.

Finally, this essay is dedicated to my wife, Jenny, and our children. For four years they have had to share a husband and father with a typewriter, and did so understandingly. I shall enjoy making reparation to my pre-schoolers in the coming days. My wife has known what it is to be careful of virtually everything, yet she has been more careful of love than of anything else. We can now spend more time together away from the typewriter, and I can make up for the neglect of years of graduate education.

Cape Town, September, 1973.

HISTORY IN THE THEOLOGICAL
METHOD OF REINHOLD NIEBUHR

CONTENTS

Chapter One

ETHICS AND HISTORY

The need for criteria for social choice - some examples. A brief evaluation of four positions in Christian ethics today: the situationist approach of Joseph Fletcher and John Robinson; the normative approach in Protestant and Catholic thought; the contextual ethics of Paul Lehmann; and the ethic of hope of Jürgen Moltmann.

The Hebrew prophetic method discussed. Karl Popper's critique of historicism, and the question of validation.

The theological method of Reinhold Niebuhr in relation to contemporary ethics. Niebuhr's affinity with the prophetic tradition.

CHAPTER ONE

ETHICS AND HISTORY: THE PROBLEM STATED

This introductory chapter is intended to state the problem which provides the impetus for a study of the theological method of Reinhold Niebuhr, and the relation between past and contemporary event in that method. It is not intended therefore to deal exhaustively with the question of the relation between ethics and history in this chapter, but to indicate the nature of the concern which a study of Niebuhr's theological method may help to illumine.

(a) Criteria For Social Choice

The immediate concern which gives rise to this essay is expressed in the question: Can we deduce or derive courses of social action from the Faith? Given the almost limitless possibilities opening up for mankind in the latter part of the twentieth century, through the accumulation of technological developments, what criteria do we have for deciding in business, industry, politics, government, or international relations the courses of action to be taken? In every area of modern life important and often novel moral issues are arising which make the need for criteria for social choice imperative.

The field of medical research provides an example of the sort of novel moral issue facing men who feel "the care of the world" to be their responsibility. Anatomical transplantation is not new, but exciting and disturbing possibilities are opening up with the increase of skills, sophisticated equipment, and modern techniques in surgery. Problems arise with the possibility of heart, or lung transplantations. The issue now is not whether methods can be perfected, but whether techniques which have been tried should be used at all. Doctors are asking whether the concomitant changes in the psychosomatic make up of the recipient in a heart transplant, and the emotional and physical strain upon relatives, are really worth the extra years of life which such a transplant may offer? Further, where do you

draw the line in organ transplantation? Successful experiments have been carried out on animals so that it is now technically possible to transplant the head of a dog onto a recipient dog. The moral, psychological, and theological implications of such a possibility are not hard to imagine.

A problem raised by transplant surgery relates to the determination of the 'moment of death' of the possible donor, and the related question of who takes responsibility for granting permission for a donor's organ to be used in such surgery. On what basis is the decision made that such surgery should or should not be done? How do we decide the issues raised by anatomical transplantation? Whatever criteria are used they will not be medical only - the questions posed by the possibilities of organ transplantation involve our whole understanding of what man is. It is therefore the concern of the theologian.

The need for criteria for social choice can also be seen in the field of industry. Decisions of great importance have to be made at different levels of management every day; decisions affecting not only the particular plant and the persons working there, but the environment in which the industry is situated.

For example, the decision to automate an industry which was previously labour-intensive because of the competition being experienced, is a decision which has wide ramifications. It affects those who have worked in that particular industry and whose jobs will now be done by machines. Are they to be re-trained for other jobs? Who is responsible for such re-training? Can the labour market stand the injection of large numbers seeking other job opportunities? The decision to automate affects the area in which the industry is situated. Local government, schooling, and families will all feel the effects of what might appear to be a purely economic decision made by management in the face of stiffer competition. Such a decision raises questions of which management is well aware, and which involve, ultimately, questions about man's function in the world: from the Christian point of view, theological questions.

Questions of social ethics become more pressing and more complex as the processes of urbanization and industrialization proceed. The possibilities which science is uncovering and

technology is making possible raise the question of man's role in the world; his purpose and function in this increasingly complex world.

Consider our understanding of work in the modern world, and the related question of the increase of leisure. Work has been understood to be a kind of punishment for sin, and men understood as born to be "hewers of wood and drawers of water". Work, in this view, is an activity of survival so that we may proceed to another and better world. In this understanding of work its sheer hardship and toil is compensated for, and therefore borne, by the promise of better things to come.

In our techonlogical society, however, work can be and is understood by many to be creative of a better world, and not preparation for another world. Work, in this view, is seen to be part of the creative process which, through the responsible use of technological resources of our time, cannot only lead to the making of a better world, but the promise of a greater increase of leisure. Such a view calls for a quite different ethic of work, and of leisure, from any which may have been appropriate in the past. It raises the question of our understanding of 'man in the world'. How we decide the manner in which we harnass the possibilities of a technological society will depend on our 'model' of man's function in the world. Our criteria for social choice will depend on how we understand man in the world; an ultimate question, and therefore a theological one.

The urgent need for an adequate understanding of man as a basis for establishing criteria for social choice comes into sharp focus when we consider that various disciplines today operate with 'models of man' which appear to be contradictory. One writer highlights the problem in the following way:

> "The breakthrough in molecular biology (particularly the breaking of the genetic code of DNA, the 'secret of life'), and the great advances in the 'artificial intelligence' of computers, have reinforced the conviction of some interpreters that 'man is just a machine'. Against such reductionism, (it can be argued) ... that the models of man as a biochemical organism and as a responsible self are not mutually exclusive. Let us acknowledge man's unity with nature and his biological basis (for which impressive evidence

> (can) be cited from molecular biology, neuro-physiology, evolutionary theory and ecology). But let us also recognize that organisms are multilevelled systems; events at higher levels of organization, especially in man, are without parallel at lower levels. Man, in short, can be viewed both as a biochemical mechanism and as a responsible self." (1)

The apparently conflicting 'models of man' highlighted in the passage just quoted reveal the need to achieve some consensus by inter-disciplinary study. For we face an unprecedented situation where social choice involves us in questions about genetic alteration and control by means of cybernetic systems. They also raise the problem whether, in the face of such possibilities, individualistic values are adequate. Technological innovations have wide ramifications. It is a question whether the development of applied science can be allowed to depend on corporation profits. This in turn raises the controversial question of the degree and manner of control to be exercised by government.

(b) Christian Ethics Today

Given the issues which arise in technological society, touched on in the preceeding paragraphs, the need for a re-appraisal of the social ethical task and for criteria for social choice becomes apparent. Can the Christian who is part of the complex technological society look for any help from the tradition in which he stands? While there is little consensus among Christian ethicists, four different types of answer seem to emerge.

There is vigorous debate among moral theologians about deciding how to decide in situations where ethical choice must be made. To enter fully into this debate would take us beyond the scope and intention of this chapter. It is necessary, however, to indicate the various types of answer which are current in the debate, and to indicate some of the problems which they raise. To do so we will adopt Frederick Carney's suggestion that three basic positions can be identified in Christian ethics today: namely, the situationalist approach, the approach based on rules or directional norms, and the contextualist position.[2] To these we will add a position which may be described as an ethic of hope.

(i) Situation Ethics:

The position typified by Joseph Fletcher and John Robinson appears to take the uncompromising view that it is not possible to deduce courses of action from the Faith, except in the sense that our understanding of love derives from it. Fletcher summarizes his position in the following way:

> "In capsule fashion, it seems to me that we can characterize the new morality as a shift away from moral law and prescriptive rules and ontologically grounded values to situational particularities and to a commitment to persons rather than principles. My own way of formulating the essence of this is in two propositions: (a) We are commanded to love people, not principles, so that the needs of human beings come before adherence to any rule - ... and (b) We are to love people and use things, 'things' including abstractions such as moral principles as well as material objects, so that the clue to immorality lies in loving things and using people." (3)

"Christianly speaking", writes Fletcher, "the norm or measure by which any thought or action is to be judged a success or failure, i.e. right or wrong, is love", and the model of love which the Christian uses is the agape of Christ.(4) Another proponent of this view is John Robinson, who has written that "love alone, because, as it were, it has a built-in moral compass, enabling it to 'home' intuitively upon the deepest need of the other, can allow itself to be directed completely by the situation." (5)

Both Fletcher and Robinson would disclaim the label "existentialist" for their position because a consistent existentialist would deny that there are any rules, whereas they argue that there is only one 'rule' - the agapeic principle. Both would presumably avow that it is not possible to deduce courses of social from the Faith, except in the sense that the agapeic principle is derived from the Faith. They would argue that love must be present in every moral act, and that for many situations the best way to decide what to do is to examine the situation and apply the agapeic principle directly to it. That is to say, it is only possible in the 'giveness' of the moment to act in love.

The situationalist's approach to Christian ethics, exemplified in Fletcher and Robinson, is a controversial one and can be

criticized from a number of perspectives. Paul Ramsey, for example, has argued that it is "an ethic of pure act-agape" based on "two silent, unexamined assumptions: (1) that Christian love has in itself no breadth to match its personal depth and therefore no rule-implying power, and (2) that love 'homes' in only upon the moment in the neighbour's reality, for which it cares." (6) For Ramsey, therefore, the problem inherent in this approach is that it asks us to examine the facts of a given situation, and then to try to determine what is the most loving thing to do in that situation. In other words, agape must be applied directly and separately in each situation.

David Evans concludes his critical evaluation of Fletcher's "love-monism" by pointing out that on Fletcher's analysis we cannot even be sure what love means, and that his account of love is a "muddle" in which at least four different meanings of the word are used. For Fletcher, love is an attitude of goodwill, and the test of a moral action is whether it increases love in this sense. In another instance, the test of a moral action is whether it expresses love. Then again, love is not an attitude but is what an agent does, and is tested by whether or not it produces good consequences. In another meaning, love is not an action but a faculty whereby a moral agent discerns what he ought to do. (7)

The critique of the situationalist approach does not lie merely in its act-agapeism or in the fact that its definition of love is "muddled"; it may be that the lack of clarity about love can be corrected. The problem with this approach is that the fact that we stand in the Hebrew-Christian tradition seems to make little difference to the way we arrive at ethical decisions. As such it offers little hope to modern man, confronted as he is by a bewildering range of choices and seemingly limitless possibilities. At best we are offered an ideal principle with which to work in a complex situation where the consequences of wrong choice are wide-ranging and serious.

While it is true that we must always remain under the judgement of the ideal of agapeic love, it is a serious question whether the situationalist's approach is really saying anything more than this. If this is so then this approach may be a counsel of despair to those who are grappling with the problems

and possibilities of our time.

The essence of N.H.G. Robinson's criticism of the situationalist's approach is that it does not take the biblical-Christian tradition seriously. He writes:

> "Love needs to know how persons ought to be treated, as Dr. J.A.T. Robinson in spite of himself was compelled to admit. Even Professor Fletcher, in distinguishing his situationalism from antinomianism, allows himself to be 'fully armed with the ethical maxims of his community and its heritage, and he treats them with respect as illuminators of his problem'; but if love is really the only absolute and if all other goods are completely relative to the person for whom they are goods, these maxims look extraordinarily like rabbits pulled out of the conjurer's hat. ...
>
> ... There is further in Robinson's ethical outlook an inherent atomism ... (a consequence of which is that) there is in Dr. Robinson's ethical teaching no sense of an ethic supplemented by a doctrine of history, no apparent concern for the fate of the moral in history at large which is characteristic of the Old Testament prophets at their best." (8)

We will have occasion to examine the method of the Hebrew prophet later in this chapter. In the context of the present discussion the significance of N.H.G. Robinson's reference to the Old Testament prophets is that the Hebrew prophet brought to his contemporary situation an understanding of the way God had dealt with His people in the past. In the interplay between the contemporary situation and the tradition in which he stood, the prophet sought to discern what God was doing, and therefore what His will for His people was. In this view there is a relation between ethics and history which is not apparent in the situationalist's approach.

Our negative appraisal of 'situation ethics' should not obscure the merits of this approach. It has rightly stressed the need for a serious evaluation of the situation in the process of ethical decision-making, and that this evaluation should use all the resources of rational calculation. Fletcher describes what he means by "situation" in these terms: it is "the priority in decision-making of the objective circumstances". He therefore speaks of his ethical method as "an empirical, situational, data-centred, fact-minded one - the rational view, in which it is supposed

that conscience is the whole person critically examining the context of decision rationally, by the rules of discourse and logical analysis." (9)

While this view of ethical decision-making is open to criticism on the grounds of its pragmatism, in that it involves an analysis of the situation with little or no recourse to history, and little or no reference to moral values other than agapeic love, it nevertheless has merit in its stress on the need to evaluate the situation. It is a question however whether ethical decision-making can be as "fact-minded", "data-centred", and "rational" as Fletcher makes out, since most situations of ethical choice involve emotion and a conflict of values. It is doubtful, for example, whether it is possible for a relative to make a decision as rationally as Fletcher suggests about giving permission for the use of an organ in a transplant operation where the donor is someone he loves.

(ii) Normative Ethics:

A second answer to emerge from the current debate concerning the possibility of deducing courses of social action from the Faith consists of what Carney (10) calls a "defence of directional norms, or ... rules, in Christian ethics." In this view "rules differ from principle in that they are concrete standards for particular types of situations". More often than not these rules "are understood to be expressions of principle, as a sexual rule may be thought to be an expression of love." Most supporters of this view believe that some (but not all) rules are absolute, in the sense that the context does not change the rule. Thus one of the proponents of this view has written of "generally valid rules of action that love itself implies", according to which some acts "are as unconditionally wrong as love is unconditionally right." (11)

Those whom Carney characterizes as defending "directional norms" stand within the natural law or moral law tradition which asserts that there are some laws given by God for the guidance of our personal and collective life. Most Catholic moral theologians stand within this tradition though, as we will show, a serious reassessment of this tradition is being made in Catholic thought.

Within Protestant thought Paul Ramsey has argued that a serious examination of the relation between love and natural moral law is necessary since "there are a number of persons, more or less of the neo-orthodox persuasion, who appear resolved to swelter out the present moral crisis with their own personal decisions impaled on the point of the existential moment or suspended wholly within a solution of justification by faith." (12)

At one level the current debate concerning natural moral law centres on whether there can in fact be a 'natural law' at all. Jean-Paul Sartre, for example, argues that man's existence precedes his essence, and that man defines his essence himself. In principle, such a view represents a radical break with the natural law tradition in Western thought in both its theological and secular forms because it looks not to the structures of reality, or to God, or to history for clues to man's essence; his essence and his values are what he creates. Following Ramsey's analysis, the nature of the challenge to natural morality exemplified in Sartre becomes clear:

> "Sartre quite rightly points out that according to traditional theism 'the individual man is the realization of a certain concept in the divine intelligence'. This was the import of the doctrine of creation, and the theory of natural law built upon it. By contrast Sartre may also help us to realize what has been insufficiently acknowledged: that some view of the essence of man is also exemplified in God's purpose for his creatures in their final redemption seen in Christ. Whether the stress be placed on creation or on redemption, man has in either case an essential nature. The 'essentialist' tradition was only cowardly attentuated, according to Sartre, in all non-religious views of natural law or theories of *a priori* values. He breaks decisively with all this, and instead begins with bare existence.
>
> Man only is ... *Opto ergo sum*. 'Man is nothing else but what he makes himself.' ... For Sartre 'there is no explaining things away (or, dropping out that last prejorative word, there is no explaining things) by reference to a fixed and given human nature'. 'Man makes himself. He isn't ready-made at the first. In choosing his ethics he makes himself, and force of circumstances is such that he cannot abstain from choosing one.' ... Man is a free, self-manufacturing being whose freedom 'in every concrete circumstance can have no other aim than to want itself.'"(13)

Sartre's challenge to natural morality is important because, among other things, it provides a clue to understanding what is at stake in the situationalist approach to ethics. For it seems that with one important reservation there is similarity between Sartre's view and that of situationalists like Fletcher. Whereas Sartre holds that there can be no rules or norms which govern ethical choice, Fletcher holds that the only norm is agape. This reservation granted, Sartre's translator Hazel Brown points to the similarity between situation ethics and humanistic existentialism when she writes: "The New Theologians are in complete harmony with humanistic existentialism in declaring that there are no rules, codes, or commandments which may not be set aside." (14)

With reference to the challenge of Sartre, Paul Ramsey argues that in spite of his radical proposals there is nevertheless a 'quantity' of natural law in Sartre's position. His position "shows that even a man who takes the most extreme measures to lighten the boat by emptying it of every concept that hampers free movement by legitimizing only some forms of conduct must still remain in the boat. To think at all about the nature of man Sartre must think with essences, even if it be only the thought that man essentially consists of an entirely dynamic and limitless freedom. However radically reshaped, here surely there is a modicum of the natural law." (15)

It is significant to note that there is in Protestant theology a serious attempt to work towards a doctrine of natural morality. This is evidenced in the work of Paul Ramsey who argues that "whether the stress be placed on creation or redemption" man has "an essential nature". For this reason, and by virtue of the fact that even Sartre cannot avoid a "modicum of the natural law", it is the task of theology to work towards a doctrine of natural morality. N.H.G. Robinson's The Groundwork of Christian Ethics is a recent example of the view that "it is impossible to resolve the dilemmas in the current discussion of the Christian ethic unless one is prepared to affirm a doctrine of natural morality, of which the traditional doctrine of natural law was but one possible version." (16)

In N.H.G. Robinson's view the traditional doctrine of natural law is "but one possible version" of the "doctrine of natural

morality". This distinction is important because it highlights the fact that there are difficulties inherent in the traditional view which account for the fact that within Catholic theology that tradition is presently being reassessed. Some of the difficulties of the traditional view illustrate not only the problemswithin that tradition, but indicate the problems with which any attempt at a doctrine of natural morality must contend.

A major difficulty confronting those who would re-interpret traditional natural law is that the tradition has its roots in a static world-view. The classist methodology could work from universal, abstract norms which are applied to particular situations. A dynamic world-view understands the world of nature as having a history, and the whole created order and man's place in it as not complete, but as evolving. In a dynamic world-view a historically conscious methodology has difficulties with notions like 'fixed orders of creation' cradled in a static world-view.

Catholic theologian Charles Curran writes that a transition from "a classist methodology to a more historically conscious methodology" is necessary. A classist methodology "tends to be abstract, a priori, deductive, and a-historical. The classist world-view attempts to cut through the accidents of time and history to arrive at the eternal, universal, and unchanging. ... The Platonic notion of a pre-existing world of ideas well exemplifies such a methodology."(17) A historically conscious methodology must proceed in a different manner, in which "more attention is given to the historical, the contingent, the personal, and the existential (without necessarily denying the other aspects of reality)." Curran cites Bernard Lonergan in this regard. Lonergan argues "for a methodology which 'can apprehend mankind as a concrete aggregate developing over time where the locus of development and, so to speak, the synthetic bond is the emergence, expansion, differentiation, dialectic of meaning and meaningful performance'. For Lonergan, meaning is not something fixed, static, and immutable; but shifting, developing, going astray, and capable of redemption." (18)

The shift to a "historically conscious methodology" is exemplified in Bernard Häring's notion of kairos. (19) This recognizes that individuals and communities "need a good number of detailed

'rules' of conduct" which "tend to become absolute laws in proportion to the immaturity of the leaders and the greater numbers of the members of the community." They tend to become absolute "in proportion also to the ability or inability to distinguish the moral value from the approximate 'rule' which protects it." The people of Israel, for example, needed "protective and restrictive rules in order to guarantee internal unity and external protection against the alien religious attitudes of the nations around them." According to Häring, there is however "an antagonism between, on the one hand, an all too 'natural' tendency of the greater number, priests, rulers, and subjects, to cling to the bare external form of the rules, and on the other, the prophetic spirit which stresses their deeper meaning and leads to a synthesis in true love of God and mercy to one's neighbour."

In the New Testament, Häring believes, the prophetic spirit reaches its high point where the Christian is no longer faced with impersonal rules, but "with his master who showed the full extent of his love, and with his brother whom he can love with Christ." The morality of the disciple is marked by "spontaneity and generosity." But spontaneity is not arbitary, "it comes through in the biblical concept of kairos (the moment of favor, the moment of decision, the present opportunity). It is God who prepares the present opportunities within the framework of the external events and even 'days' which appear to be bad."

Häring's understanding of kairos is given in an essay entitled "Dynamism and Continuity in a Personalistic Approach to Natural Law." It provides an example of the manner in which the divide between 'nature' and 'grace', which has characterized much natural law morality, is being overcome in Catholic thought. In this view, history is taken seriously whilst at the same time asserting that it may contain "moments" of kairos; that is to say, moments in which the grace of God may be discerned. As Häring says: "The full understanding of the meaning of history, of the 'hour of favour', and of vigilance for the coming of Christ in these events belongs to the realm of faith. However, after the discovery of such a fundamental attitude as vigilance for the present opportunities, good human reasoning appreciates how important it is for a fully developed moral life, for maturity in ethics."

In the world where history is taken seriously, and an evolutionary motif predominates, the problems and possibilities of our time call for what Ian Barbour describes as the "ethics of novelty". (20) Since we now face ethical choices which have never arisen in human history, the import of Barbour's suggestion can be understood. But an adequate ethic for our time cannot reject out of hand the need to develop an approach to natural morality if it is to take history, including the history of nature, seriously. By the same token it must be "vigilant" in Häring's sense, if it is to be open to what God is doing in the present, and open to the future to which He calls us. Such an ethic will no doubt be fraught with problems, but it cannot in principle be ruled out because our world-view is different from that in which traditional natural law had its roots.

(iii) Contextual Ethics

In the current debate in Christian ethics a third position emerges concerning the problem of how we arrive at criteria for social choice. This position is characterized by Paul Lehmann in his Ethics in a Christian Context. Lehmann takes the view that the context in which ethical decision is made is important, and so is the forming of the character of the agent who must make the decision. (21)

Lehmann concentrates his attention on the role of conscience in ethics. He speaks of a "theonomous" conscience operating within a threefold context: the Church (koinonia), the Faith, and the objective situation in which the Christian must make his decisions. Thus for Lehmann the Christian brings to the concrete situation a conscience formed in the context of his Faith, within the community of the Church. Such a conscience will, in Lehmann's view, be "immediately sensitive" to the situation and make a right decision in that situation. Regarding Lehmann's view of the "theonomous" conscience, Fletcher has this criticism to make; it is on the "intuition-guidance wing of the new morality" because it pretends "that the Spirit-led conscience can trust it is being 'immediately sensitive' to the right action in the decisive situation." (22)

Lehmann has argued that Christian ethics is "the disciplined

reflection upon the question and its answer: What am I, as a believer in Jesus Christ and as a member of his church, to do?" (23) He further argues that "Christian ethics is koinonia ethics", since it is from within the koinonia that the believer gets his answer to the question about what he should do.(24)

N.H.G. Robinson has criticized Lehmann in two related aspects of his method. In the first place Lehmann makes little positive use of natural morality. Although Lehmann does say "we cannot ignore 'the common moral sense of mankind, the distilled ethical wisdom of the ages'" the problem, according to Robinson, "is that if, when it comes to the reflective discipline of Christian ethics, we assign to natural morality no positive role we seem to be doing no better than ignoring it. It is difficult to believe that 'the common moral sense of mankind' is important in practice but not in theory." (25)

The weight of Robinson's other criticism of Lehmann is that his notion of koinonia ethics makes little of the imperatives in the biblical-Christian tradition. That is to say, the tradition makes no demands upon the Christian. On the contrary, Lehmann makes a distinction between imperative and indicative in his ethic. Following Robinson, "the fact that 'in the koinonia one is always fundamentally in an indicative rather than in an imperative situation'", leads us to the conclusion "that this indicative is not a divine indicative but a human one, that while 'the "ought" factor cannot be ignored in ethical theory' - one would hope not - 'the primary ethical reality is the human factor, the human indicative, in every situation involving the interrelationships and the decisions of men'". (26)

At the beginning of this chapter we suggested that our criteria for social choice will depend largely on our 'model' of man, and raised the question whether, in our quest for an adequate 'model' of man we can look for criteria in the biblical-Christian tradition. This leads us to a criticism of Lehmann's assertion that the "primary ethical reality is the human factor, the human indicative." If Lehmann is stressing the need to take account of all that the sciences can give us in our quest for an adequate model of man, his assertion is unexceptionable. But it appears that he is saying more than this.

Are we to depend for our criteria on the texture of human "interrelationships" to the exclusion of any imperatives there might be in the Faith? Are there no preceptual claims to be made upon the texture of the human relationships in Christian ethics? Paul Ramsey has argued that the notions of 'wholeness' and 'interrelatedness', so important in Lehmann's ethics, draw their meanings from contemporary thought. Ramsey writes:

> "The truth is that in Lehmann's ethics the development of a normative ethics of wholeness is inhibited by the degree to which Christian categories prevail, and the development of a Christian ethics is frustrated by his readiness to turn elsewhere for the meaning of maturity. In order to see quite clearly, however, that Lehmann's minimum notion of wholeness is drawn from the philosophy of self-realization developed in the modern era, with a liberal dosage of Freudianism, one need only ask: why is it more 'mature' for a person to develop organically in interpersonal relationships than for his maturity to be determined by wholly other claims, commands, obligations, imperatives, and by what's right? ...
>
> The business of Christian ethics is to exhibit and formulate the implications of 'mature manhood' in the New Testament understanding of it as these may bear on all the concrete 'wholes' in the world in which men are called into discipleship...."(27)

The force of Ramsey's criticism of Lehmann is not blunted if we assert that Ramsey's understanding of the "business of Christian ethics", in the above passage, is limited by its emphasis on the New Testament. Christian ethics must surely not exclude the Old Testament and the post-Biblical resources of the Christian tradition in its "business".

Although Lehmann's 'contextual ethics' is open to substantive criticism of the sort we have examined here, it does nevertheless represent a serious attempt to establish a method whereby the resources of the Faith, the role of community, and the concrete situation are taken into account. As such it holds promise for those who search for a way of making ethical decisions in the face of the responsibilities of our time.

(iv) An Ethic of Hope

There is emerging in the contemporary debate in Christian ethics a position which is in important respects different from

those which we have thus far examined. Based largely on the work of Jürgen Moltmann, this position is characterized by an eschatalogical emphasis, and proceeds by a process of negation to build an ethic of hope.

Moltmann deals with the problem of an ethic of hope in a chapter entitled "Understanding History in Christian Social Ethics" in his Hope and Planning. (28) What he calls "a historical ethic of hope" in this chapter presupposes the theological groundwork of his major book Theology of Hope. (29) It is beyond our scope here to discuss Moltmann's theology as such, but he does indicate the basis for his ethical approach in a manner which may be summarized.

> "For a biblical, Israelite Christian theology, the reality of man is understood through an eschatalogical disclosure to be 'history'. ... Israel did not flee from the terrors of history into natural eternal laws ... On the contrary, she recognized and expected the coming of God with the incalculable events themselves. ... the Israelite-Christian man stands in the 'apocalypse of that which is coming'. He expects truth to come out of the future of God ...
>
> ... According to the biblical conception, man is identified and determined in and through that history in which he is incorporated by God's covenant and promise. His 'essence', and that means his identity and continuity, is determined by the call of God, by his being called into a partnership in the covenant ... (30)

With this understanding of eschatological "disclosure" of the "reality of man", Moltmann's next step in building a basis for an ethic of hope is to assert the "profanity of human reality": a "Christian theology sees the reality of man as a godless, worldly reality, disclosed by the revelation of God in the cross of Christ." (31) The process of negation to which we referred earlier is evident in the manner in which Moltmann treats the Cross. "If the whole of man's reality is accepted by God in the cross, then at the same time man's reality is revealed to him in the cross as a reality which is both directed and forsaken by God." (32) The conclusion which Moltmann draws from this interpretation of the Cross is that man "finds himself in a godless world which is borne and taken up only in the cross of Christ. This is not the world on which man can depend. It is the world in which God has suffered; only the cross makes it possible to accept it in its

total worldliness, through self-abandonment and sacrifice." (33)

It what sense can Moltmann be searching for an ethic of hope if "this is not the world on which man can depend"? His answer is that anything which petrifies history, or aspects within history, is challenged by God since history must be open to the future. "In the hidden faithfulness of the Spirit, man is directed ahead of himself; he acquires future - not an automatic future but rather a historical future - in the departure from the ever-tempting subterfuges of history into nature and its cyclical pattern or an artificial nature produced by technology and its rythms." (34)

An important feature of Moltmann's thought is that he universalizes the covenant community, understood in both its Old and New Testament senses. "In eschatological expectation and historical sacrifice, all nations and men are included in the community of the covenant of God, in the demand of his commandment and the light of his promise. (35) The eschatological community, including "all men and nations", is given "direction" by "promise and commandment" which "destine the community for an eschatological fellowship, i.e. for the assembly of those who live from the hope in that future which is determined by the historical event of Jesus Christ." (36)

The significance for social ethics which Moltmann draws from the theological basis summarized in the foregoing paragraphs is as follows.

> "(a) The people of God who travel in hope become a source of eschatological unrest within a society which attempts to save itself from history through a dream of technological perfection. The <u>eschatological</u> impatience (Claudel) of the community, however, basically corresponds to the messianic character of God's history in the world. ... (In) this community it can become clear that social institutions cannot overcome their temporality and relativity, their historicity. They cannot perpetuate themselves either mythically or ideologically.
>
> (b) ... the people of God ... also provide a <u>directive</u> for that society which, confronted with unavoidable institutional diversity, sinks into the trauma of resignation in the face of meaningless determinism. ... Here social institutions can be made obsolete by being questioned about their final purpose and their eschatological justification.
>
> (c) ... eschatological impatience and hope relate not

> only to man in himself, but to the whole man, to soul and body, to the individual in his social condition, ... The eschatological salvation, the New Testament soteria, must therefore be interpreted more strongly than previously in terms of the Old Testament shalom and the concept of the Kingdom of God. ... In the expectation of the shalom, of the kingdom of God which comes to earth, of the new heaven and the new earth, one can find and give hope and courage for a life which is now, for the most part, determined only by functions." (37)

The essay we have summarized was given by Moltmann to a study group on 'Sociology and Theology' at the Evangelische Akademie in Berlin. The "attempt at a historical ethic of hope" seeks to "point in a definite direction", although it cannot present a complete picture. Moltmann believes that "the plan of a general ethical field theory of Christian hope would also be conceivable. Christian action and suffering are the 'fruits of hope'. Good works do not build the kingdom of God, but hope in the coming kingdom assumes ethical forms within history. Between optimistic chiliasm and apocalyptic lethargy Christian life stands in the dawn of hope (Rom. 13. 11-14)" (38)

Moltmann's theology represents an attempt to reinterpret Christian faith from an eschatological perspective, and draws upon Hegalian philosophy to do so. In the view of William Nicholls, Moltmann wishes to break the dominance of Kantian thought in modern theology by adopting a different view of reality "in which the opposition between subjectivity and objectification is overcome. ... Such a project at once puts those who entertain it upon Hegalian ground" in that they wish to view history "as a process having inherent meaning and direction, perceived not inserted by the human mind, ..." (39)

The key eschatological symbol in Moltmann's theology is the Resurrection of Jesus. (40) He believes that in the face of a "positivistic and mechanistic definition of the nature of history as a self-contained system of cause and effect", (41) theology has the possibility of constructing its own concept of history and its own view of the tale of history on the basis of a theological and eschatological understanding of the resurrection." (42) It can do this by treating the resurrection as a "history-making" event "in the light of which all other history is illumined, called into question and transformed." (43)

It would be tempting to discuss Moltmann's theology and the questions it raises. It is a real question, for example, whether the view of history as "a self-contained system of cause and effect" which Moltmann wishes to overcome is in fact seriously held today. We will have cause to show during the course of this study that scientists no longer hold a closed view of nature, and that the positivistic assumptions of an earlier time are seriously questioned in the disciplines of history and sociology. Nevertheless, the merit of Moltmann's theology is that it represents a serious attempt to deal with the problem of the Resurrection; the touchstone of modern theology.

We have noted that the context of Moltmann's "attempt" at an "ethic of hope" is a discussion between sociologists and theologians. A large part of his essay is taken up with the problems of our technological society. It is clear that he sees dangers in a technology which 'clothes' itself in the guise of a saviour of contemporary society. From a biblical-Christian perspective any such view is open to charges of idolatry. We would suggest, however, that the problem is not that technology takes on such a guise, though some may see it as such. Technological advance does pose serious problems for our time; witness the ecological crisis in modern cities. But these problems call for criteria by which we can decide the manner and extent to which the technological possibilities of our time can be utilized.

Paradoxically, Moltmann's "ethic of hope" seems to offer little help to those who grapple with the problems of a technological age. The direction he suggests would seem to negate the present in the hope of a "new heaven and a new earth". Will the "new earth" be freed from technology? If so then it is radically discontinuous with the present, and we must presumably believe that the hand of God cannot be seen in the technological society.

Those who wrestle with the problems of a technological society can look for no criteria for social choice from the Faith except in the sense of standing under the ideal of some future "new earth". There are those who can agree with Moltmann that we stand in "the dawn of hope", but who would want to see technological society as part of that dawn, without believing that it represents the ideal society. Does hope have to negate techmology? Can we not believe, im Moltmann's terms, that God's "promise and

commandment" call us to be responsible stewards of the possibilities of technology? Do we have to agree with Brazillian Reubem Alves, a student of Moltmann, that "technology creates a false man, a man who learns how to find happiness in what is given to him by the system. His soul is created in the image of what he can have." (44) Alves' A Theology of Human Hope from which we have just quoted, and his recent Tomorrow's Child (45) seem to proceed by negating all that is involved in the technological society in order to speak of a new tomorrow. We do not question the note of Hope which Moltmann and Alves have brought to contemporary theology, but we question whether it is necessary to negate technology as such in order to do this. An eschatological perspective may provide a vantage point from which to make a radical critique of Western society, but its effect in the theologians considered is revolutionary. It is a question whether an eschatological perspective needs to be revolutionary, in the sense of negating the technological society. Is it not possible to take an evolutionary view of the world without losing the critical vantage point which an eschatological perspective provides?

(b) Ethics And History In The Prophetic Method

In our discussion of some of the positions which have emerged in the contemporary debate about Christian ethics reference has been made to the Biblical tradition, as exemplified in the prophets.

The prophets of Israel deduced courses of social action from history. Basic to this was the way in which Israel, as exemplified in the prophetic tradition, understood history. In a key passage in his book The Old Testament Against Its Environment G.E. Wright sums up the Hebrew view of history:

> "Thus it came about that biblical sense of history was born. The contemporary polytheisms, having analyzed the problem of life over against nature, had little sense of or concern with the significance of history. Nature with its changing seasons was cyclical, and human life, constantly integrating itself with nature in a cyclical manner. But Israel was little interested in nature, except as God used it together with his historical acts to reveal himself and to accomplish his purpose. Yahweh was the God of history, the

> living God unaffected by the cycles of nature, who had set himself to accomplish a definite purpose in time. Consequently the religious literature of Israel was primarily concerned with the history of God's acts in and through his Chosen People. The great confessions of faith were primarily historical reviews of what God had done and what the people had done in response. Their purpose was to engender faith, praise, and repentence. The story of the past was a guide to the present and the key to the future. Both beginning and end, creation and eschatology, therefore, became an integral part of the Israelite view of time." (46)

The prophets clearly understood Israel's history as the story of Yahweh's plan for His people, and concerned themselves with the obligations of such a view of history. History was moving toward a goal precisely because God had determined both the movement and the goal. Yet, as Wright points out, "Israel could not have arrived at this awareness of the meaning of time apart from her theology of election." (47)

Not only did the prophets understand the 'saving events' of Israel's history - the Exodus, and the Sinai Covenant, for example - in the manner just described. They also saw contemporary events in the light of God's activity in history. The prophets had "a keen and unprecendented awareness of the great historical movements and changes of their own day and generation", says von Rad. (48)

Amos and Isaiah work in the shadow of Assyria's threat; Jeremiah sees impending disaster from the neo-Babylonians; Deutro-Isaiah is full of the emergence of the Persian Cyrus; and Haggai and Zechariah take account of the events that shook the Persian Empire in 521. The prophets took contemporary history seriously, and when they expounded upon God's new acts in history they did so with reference to Israel's 'saving history'. That is to say, they used the 'clue' derived more often than not from the Exodus-Sinai complex of events, by which they understood God's working out of his purposes in history, to interpret contemporary events. Neither the prophet nor his hearers had any way of conceiving a dimension outside the saving acts of God in their canonical history.

It should be noted that whilst the prophet sees God to be using Assyria and Babylon as instruments of His will, they too

are under His judgement. God is the supreme and undisputed controller of history, including the history of Assyria and Babylon. "History lies in the hollow of his hand", is the way H.H. Rowley puts it. (49) Assyria is Yahweh's "rod of anger" (Isa. 10:5), says the prophet, but "when the Lord performed his whole work upon Mount Zion" He will "punish the fruit of the stout heart of the king of Assyria" (Isa. 10:12) In this connection the prophets provide an example of the point we made when discussing eschatology in Moltmann's ethic. For the prophet was able to see history as moving towards a goal without negating the historical realities. Both Israel's and the destinies of Assyria and Babylon are "in the hollow of His hand", and Israel's enemies are seen as working towards this goal.

The sense of movement of history towards a future goal, in which the promises of the past and the hopes of the present find their fulfillment, is a hallmark of the Israelite conception of history. It is also the source of our modern conception of history in the Western world. As G.E. Wright points out: both liberal idealism and Marxism have, of course, secularized the Biblical conception, but both owe their genesis ultimately to this completely unique and revolutionary doctrine." (50)

What we have termed the 'prophetic method' took past and contemporary history seriously in attempting to discern the will of God for His people. History, for this reason, was important in deducing courses of social action. Modern critics, however, would refute the contention of the prophetic method that it is possible to use history in our search for criteria in social ethics. In this connection, the work of Karl Popper must be noted.

Popper's Critique of Historicism

Popper published a refutation of the Marxist theory of history called The Poverty of Historicism (1957), which he dedicated to the "memory of the countless men and women of all creeds or nations or races who fell victims to the fascist and communist belief in Inexorable Laws of Historical Destiny." (51)

His book is important for its critique of historicism as such, but from our point of view its importance lies in the fact that

Marxism is a secularized version of the Biblical concept of history. Popper's critique, therefore, has a bearing on what we have said about the prophetic method.

As Popper states it, the fundamental thesis of his book is "that the belief in historical destiny is sheer superstition, and that there can be no prediction of the course of human history by scientific or any other rational means ..." (52)

Popper argues that for strictly logical reasons it is impossible to predict the future course of history. Any venture which proposes to do this he calls "historicism". Popper's argument is as follows. The course of human history is influenced by the growth of human knowledge. Since there can be no rational or scientific way of predicting the future growth of knowledge, we cannot predict the future course of human history. This means that we must reject the possibility of a scientific theory of historical development (he would argue that Marxist theory is such an attempt) as a basis for historical prediction. The fundamental aim of historicist methods is to develop a method which corresponds with theoretical science. Since this is impossible, the historicist method is misconceived and historicism collapses. (53)

Basic to Popper's critique is his contention that there is no way of refuting claims made by the historicist. They are therefore pseudo-scientific. To discuss Popper's view in detail would take us beyond the scope of this essay, but it is important to note some of his arguments. Popper denies that scientific theories are constructed by inductive methods, from our observations about the world. In fact they are usually begun as bold "hunches" or intuitions about the world. What distinguishes scientific theories from metaphysics or pseudo-science (and therefore historicism) is that scientific theory can be tested by empirical means. The method of testing is negative in the sense that "it must be possible for an empirical scientific system to be refuted by experience." (54) The method of testing in science proceeds by means of the principle of falsifiability.

The problem with pseudo-scientific theories is that "it is easy to obtain confirmations or verifications for nearly every theory if we look for confirmations." (55) The principle of falsifiability, however, enables Popper to distinguish science from theories which look like science but are pseudo-science, and

which get verification because they interpret all events in accordance with their presuppositions, and do not recognize any event which may refute them.

While not strictly speaking a positivist, Popper does favour scientific language. He says that the principle of falsifiability is not a criterion of meaning, but a way of distinguishing science from pseudo-science. "It draws the line inside meaningful language, not around it." (56) John Macquarrie has shown how Popper's principle of falsifiability has been used by linguistic philosophers to show the vacuous character of religious statements which seem "to suffer from the vice of irrefutability." (57) Macquarrie cites an example: "a man enjoying health and prosperity may say 'God cares for me'. He loses his prosperity, but he still says that God cares for him, for he retains his health. He falls ill, but now he points to the fact that his life is spared as evidence that God cares for him. He eventually dies, but his friends claim that God still cares for him in a world beyond. Nothing is allowed to refute the assertion. ... What would need to happen to falsify the belief that 'God cares for me'? And if nothing is counted as refuting this belief, then how does it differ from the belief that 'God does not care for me'?" (58)

Any discussion of theology's relation to history will have to satisfy the requirements of validation. What do we make of the prophetic method of understanding history, in the light of Popper? In what way, if any, can the statement 'God is at work in history' be refuted? Or to put the question another way: how can this typically prophetic statement about history be tested? We will have reason to deal with the problems posed by these questions more than once in the course of this essay. Nevertheless we will attempt now to deal with these questions briefly, and in general terms.

The Prophetic Method and the Question of Validation

In our discussion of the prophetic method we said that the prophets 'came at' contemporary history with a historical perspective which had been developed and refined over a long period of time. Basic to this was the fact that God was actively working out his purposes in history, using Israel as His chosen instrument,

but using also other events and peoples. For this reason history revealed not only that God is at work in the world, but also the character of God. Questions of man's responsibility before God were therefore of paramount importance. Looking at contemporary events with this perspective they were bound to ask what God was doing in the world, and what Israel's response should be.

There is an important sense in which the prophetic method is not unlike what Popper calls the "method of hypothesis" of science, which he argues is deductive. A hypothesis is tested by empirical means in order to weed out false theories, to find the weak points of a theory and to reject it if it is falsified by the test. (59) It can be argued that the prophetic method is not unlike the "method of hypothesis". The prophet's belief in Yahweh has been tested and refined through the course of history in terms of human experience, and continues to be tested and refined. The question of how this testing took place brings us to another important factor in prophecy.

What the prophet said about Yahweh could of course only be understood by those who stood in the same tradition as he did. What the prophet said was true or false in terms of the tradition in which he and his hearers stood. Truth exists in a tradition. There can be no presuppositionless history, as R.G. Collingwood has said. Every achievement of historical meaning is the result of asking a specific question based on a "previously held presupposition about reality." (60) Thus the prophet operated in a tradition which had a fixed point- the transcendent God who entered into a covenant relationship with his people Israel. The prophet and his hearers operated with the same presupposition about reality; namely, the transcendent God at work in history.

It is for this reason that the prophet could allow nothing to refute his basic assertion that 'God is at work in history', without stepping out of the tradition in which this assertion is made. But this is not to say that this assertion is not tested. It is tested on the anvil of experience in the history of Israel and is thereby validated or modified.

A logical point about religious language is evident here. If you stand in a tradition which asserts a Covenant God at work in history, and believe therefore that God enters into a 'personal'

relationship with His people Israel, then you cannot tell at a given moment what set of circumstances in the future will refute your belief. If a set of circumstances were to arise, as for example in Macquarrie's illustration, which caused you not to hold this belief any longer then you can be said to have 'converted out' of the belief and the tradition in which it is held. The language of personal relationships is the language in which most prophetic literature is couched. An example from the field of personal relationships might elucidate the nature of religious language. I cannot predict at this point what set of factors would convince me that my wife no longer loves me. Further, I would put the best construction on her actions, however unusual, explaining perhaps that she is tired, or that she is doing this for my good, or that she is not well; but not that she does not love me. If however I did reach the conviction that she no longer loved me, I may well be able, in retrospect, to look at certain experiences, events, and circumstances which I could say influenced me to believe that she no longer loves me.

The significance we draw from our discussion of the prophetic method is that it was in the interplay between presuppositions held by faith ('God is at work in history') and contemporary event that the prophet deduced courses of social action. History, in this view, is revelatory of God's will and therefore meaningful. The prophet would agree with Popper's contention that the course of history is influenced by human knowledge, but would affirm, however, that this knowledge includes an understanding of God. This leads him to believe that God is at work in history, and that under God history itself is moving toward a goal. Popper would call this view "theistic historicism" which he would include in his attack on all forms of historicism which justify the "meaning of history" on the basis of presupposition or ideology.

"History has no meaning", contends Popper, because neither "nature nor history can tell us what we ought to do. Facts, whether those of nature or those of history, cannot make decisions for us, they cannot determine the ends we are going to choose." "If we think that history progresses, or that we are bound to progress then we commit the same mistake as those who believe that history has a meaning that can be discovered in it and need not be given to it. For to progress is to move towards some kind

of end, towards an end which exists for us as human beings. History cannot do that; only we, the human individuals can do it." (61)

To this we would reply that to believe that history is meaningful, and that it is moving towards a goal, as the prophets did, is not to say that we are "bound" to progress or to claim divine sanction for particular events in history. It is to affirm, as Reinhold Niebuhr has reminded as , that 'God can make even the wrath of men to please Him.' Popper, it seems, fails to see the similarity between the scientist's "hunch" and the 'clue' or presupposition which the theist brings to his interpretation of history.

On the logic of Popper's contention we are left only with the possibility of piece-meal social engineering by which we may correct error here, and overcome pathology there, but with no vision of ends except those which we create in a particular moment of history. We believe that John Cumpsty's rejoinder to Popper's contention is correct: "I think Popper is wrong. In the first place because I think that the alternative to a bad and fixed ideology is not the absence of an ideology but a good and self-transforming one, and second that there is a logic to historicism for the theist, who believes that there is a fixed point of reference and guarantee, both beyond the historical and discernibly active within it." (62)

(c) Summary

The crucial question for Christian ethics is whether and in what manner the Christian can look to the tradition in which he stands for help in arriving at criteria for social choice in the face of the challenges of our time. We have examined briefly some of the answers which emerge in the contemporary debate.

A study of Reinhold Niebuhr's theological method reveals an interplay between the biblical-Christian tradition and contemporary experience wherein he was able to find criteria for social choice. As such it offers help to those who today search for a way of making responsible ethical decisions.

Niebuhr can be described as a situationalist only to the

extent that he took contemporary history seriously. He would argue, however, that to say that all we have to help us decide is an agapeic principle is too simplistic.

He is critical of natural law morality. He nevertheless appreciates the validity of this view. He would argue that change calls into question the relevancy of some norms of conduct. He would stress that the relation between love and natural ~~love~~ LAW is important for personal and social ethics, though revision of the tradition is necessary.

In many respects Niebuhr is 'contextual' in Lehmann's sense, though his estimate of man is derived from the biblical-Christian tradition to a greater extent than Lehmann's appears to be. As such there is in Niebuhr's method a more explicit theological groundwork for Christian ethics.

Niebuhr's 'Christian realism' would make it difficult for him to adopt an ethic of hope in Moltmann's sense. Niebuhr speaks of a 'provisional pessimism' and 'qualified optimism' as the proper attitude of the Christian.

In his theological method Niebuhr reveals a close affinity to what we have called the prophetic method. He derived his ethics from a reading of past and contemporary history. Basic to that reading of history was his belief in the sovereignty of God over human history. In Popper's terms, Niebuhr's position may be described as 'theistic historicism' because he believed history to be both meaningful and revelatory of God. His manner of viewing history, however, is neither superstitious nor idolatrous as Popper contends all theistic historicism is.

Chapter Two

THE FORMATIVE CONTEXT

The purpose of this chapter is to offer a biographical account of Reinhold Niebuhr's life and thought, and to trace the 'torturous path' which led him to a Christian realist position.

Niebuhr's early years considered in the context of the rapid economic and social changes in the United States. The influence of Niebuhr's father; his academic training; the work of Harnack.

The ministry in Detroit: the influence of the Social Gospel; Niebuhr's fight with Henry Ford; industrial expansion in Detroit.

Niebuhr's first decade at Union Theological Seminary, coinciding with the Depression of 1929 and its aftermath, and the events leading up to the Second World War. Niebuhr's search for criteria for social choice: his move beyond pacificism, and ultimately beyond socialism.

The importance of the Gifford Lectures as a turning point in Niebuhr's thought. The influence of Augustine, and of Pascal and Kierkegaard, in Niebuhr's Christian Realism. Niebuhr's fight with Karl Barth.

CHAPTER TWO

THE FORMATIVE CONTEXT:
BIOGRAPHICAL NOTES ON REINHOLD NIEBUHR

For over fifty years Reinhold Niebuhr was engaged in the theoretical and practical issues relating to his contemporary world. His involvement in social ethics began when he started his ministry in Detroit in 1915, and continued throughout his academic career as a teacher of Christian social ethics at the Union Theological Seminary from 1929 to his semi-retirement in 1965. Until his death in 1971 he remained a much sought after analyst of the contemporary social and political scene in the United States and oversea.

In his search for criteria for social choice Niebuhr was to undergo many changes in his thinking. What he described as his "simple Christian 'liberal' moralism"(1) of his early Detroit days changed in the face of the complexities of the problems in that rapidly growing city. Then for a period of time which coincided, to some extent, with the depression of the late twenties and early thirties Niebuhr attacked the ills of the capitalist society with socialist and Marxist critiques. Later, after nearly ten years at Union where he came into contact with the mainstream of thought in classical and biblical theology, he sought to subject both liberal idealism and Marxist theory to the biblical-Christian understanding of man's nature and destiny.

Throughout his life, Niebuhr's thought and the events of contemporary history had a profound influence upon each other. The interplay between events and his own thinking about those events in the light of his faith, caused him to change his outlook many times. The "torturous path" he travelled in his thinking, he described as adjusting "the original Protestant heritage of individualism and perfectionism through a world depression and two world wars to the present realities of a highly technical and collective culture, facing the perils of a nuclear age."(2)

If, as Niebuhr implies, it is possible to relate the Protestant heritage" to the complex problems of our technological society, exemplified in the ever-present dangers of nuclear war, then it is important to study his theological method. If Niebuhr

is successful, then his method will assist us in answering the question with which we began this essay: namely, is it possible to deduce courses of social action from the faith.

To understand the "torturous path" which Niebuhr travelled, and the interplay between his theology and what he called "present realities", is the purpose of this chapter. To do this we will give a brief biographical outline of his life, and examine four discernible phases in that path.

(1) A BIOGRAPHICAL OUTLINE

Karl Paul Reinhold Niebuhr was born in Wright City, Missouri, in 1892, to the wife of a young pastor of the Evangelical Church. His father, Gustav Niebuhr, had arrived in the United States at the age of seventeen, largely in rebellion against his father and against having to spend several years in the rigid German military service.

At school Niebuhr gave indications of the facility for words and sensitivity to their meanings which were to mark his adult life. He excelled in school debates, and also in writing; winning a local contest for short story writing whilst at school.

From high school, Reinhold and his brother Richard, went to Elmhurst, a denominational college offering special scholarships for ministers' sons, but having no recognised Bachelor's degree. After four years at Elmhurst, the two Niebuhr brothers went to Eden Theological Seminary.

Whilst at Eden, Niebuhr's father took ill suddenly and died after a short illness. This was in April, 1913. Reinhold went on to Yale Divinity School to complete his graduate studies and gained a Master of Arts degree. Family needs, and his "boredom with epistemology" prompted him to "forswear (further) graduate study and the academic career to which it pointed, and to accept a parish of my denomination in Detroit."(3)

Niebuhr spent the years 1915 to 1928 in his Detroit parish. During this time he became actively involved in social and political issues. He became a member of the Fellowship of Reconciliation, a pacificist organization. He served on the Mayor's Committee for Racial Affairs. With the rise of the Ford Motor Company in Detroit, Niebuhr worked with men like Walter Reuther

in the establishment of organized labour unions. Throughout his ministry in Detroit he kept a "notebook", extracts of which he published in 1929 under the title Leaves from the Notebook of a Tamed Cynic. In 1927 he published his first book: Does Civilization Need Religion?". As early as 1916 he began writing for national magazines, and published some forty articles during his stay in Detroit.

Largely as a result of the generosity of Sherwood Eddy, an influential figure in Y.M.C.A., Niebuhr was able to spend time speaking to university groups, religious and secular, in the United States. Eddy contributed sufficient money to Niebuhr's Bethel congregation to pay for an assistant to enable him to take up such speaking engagements.

When Henry Sloane Coffin became President of the Union Theological Seminary he invited Niebuhr to take up a teaching post there. In late 1928, Niebuhr took up the post at Union; the Chair of Christian Ethics. This post he held for the rest of his active life.

During the early years of his stay at Union, Niebuhr was instrumental in establishing the Fellowship of Socialist Christians. He also became involved in the growing ecumenical movement, and attended the World Conference on "Church, Community, and State" in Oxford in 1937. His early years at Union were marked by a critical attitude to capitalist society, largely influenced by appropriated socialist and Marxist critiques. In 1932 Niebuhr published what he called his "first major work", entitled Moral Man and Immoral Society. This book, says Niebuhr, "was not uncritically Marxist, but it does reveal a failure to recognize the ultimate similarities, despite immediate differences, between liberal and Marxist utopianism."(4)

In 1939, Niebuhr was invited to give the Gifford Lectures at Edinburgh University. "I chose", he said, "the only subject which I could have chosen, because the other fields of Christian thought were beyond my competence. I lectured on The Nature and Destiny of Man, comparing Biblical with classical and modern conceptions of human nature and destiny."(5) The Gifford Lectures, published in two volumes, might be called Niebuhr's magnum opus, although his biographer points out that Niebuhr did not think so, since he

always considered his 'next book' to be his magnum opus.

Later when Niebuhr was invited to give the Lyman Beecher Lectures at Yale, the Warrack Lectures at the Scottish Universities, and to take up a lectureship at the University of Uppsala in Sweden, he elaborated on the second part of his Gifford Lectures, and published a volume entitled Faith and History, in 1949.

Reflecting on his Gifford Lectures and Faith and History in his Intellectual Autobiography, Niebuhr says:

> "the reader would be fair in concluding that I have not, in years of theological study, proceeded very far from my original ethical and apologetic interest."(6)

The advent of his Gifford Lectures, on Niebuhr's own admission, marks a turning point in his work in social and political ethics. Niebuhr continued to publish books and articles. But he "learned gradually to subject both viewpoints (that of classical and modern idealism, and Marxist theory) to a Christian criticism. I learned increasingly to value highly, rather than be apologetic for, the unique emphasis of Biblical faith."(7)

If the Gifford Lectures signified the turning point in his life, Niebuhr's subsequent writings indicate the way in which the "unique emphasis" of his biblical-Christian faith served as the basis for his profound and penetrating critique and analysis of contemporary history. In this sense the faith which he came to "value highly" did provide him with criteria for social choice. But his theological method is seldom explicitly stated, and seems always subordinate to the apologetic and ethical tasks which were his primary concerns throughout his life.

In 1952 he suffered a severe illness from which he never completely recovered. The last twenty years of his life were spent in constant pain. Many believed that his illness would mean a premature retirement. But Niebuhr used the convalescent period immediately after that illness to write his The Self in the Dramas of History. He retired from Union in 1960 at the age of 68. His last full-length book was published in 1965: Man's Nature and His Communities. As far as we know he was still writing for journals as late as 1969. During the period 1964 - 1968 he returned to Union to offer a seminar in social ethics, first at the Seminary, and then in his apartment on Riverside Drive.

Niebuhr's death in June 1971 was marked by a full-page tribute in Time Magazine (June 14, 1971). The esteem in which he was held in the United States is indicated by the following words from that tribute:

> "For the past four decades, Niebuhr has been pre-eminent in his field, the greatest Protestant theologian born in America since Jonathan Edwards. Last week Niebuhr died at 78 in Stockbridge, Mass., the same town where Edwards once lived in exile - banished for his too-demanding theology. The funeral was held in the church where Edwards had preached.
>
> Niebuhr left behind him not only a heritage of theological realism but a career of political involvement almost unique in his profession...
>
> (In the last twenty years of his life) a younger generation of Protestant liberals was drifting away from Niebuhr's concept of constantly contending self-interest to revolutionary third-world romanticism. He had decried 'a too-simple social radicalism (that) does not recognize how quickly the poor, the weak, the despised of yesterday may on gaining a social victory over their detractors, exhibit the same arrogance.' It was a comment typical of his hardheaded, pragmatic realism in human affairs. His successor as the leader of Protestant thought cannot avoid dealing with Niebuhr's forceful logic; he will have to abandon it deliberately or build on it."

The formative context of Niebuhr's theology is a compound of the events of a turbulent period in modern history and his attempts to "adjust" his theological heritage that it may be relevant to that history. In order to understand how Niebuhr came to what we will call his 'mature' position it is necessary that we now examine in some detail four distinguishable phases of his life and thought.

(2) THE EARLY YEARS (1892-1914)

Reinhold Niebuhr was born in the year that Charles and Frank Duryea created the first petrol-driven vehicle that actually ran. By the time he went to Detroit, motor cars were being mass-produced; revolutionizing the social and economic life in the United States. The advent of the motor car industry, which provided job opportunities for the growing numbers of workers in the cities, is symbolic of the rapid social and economic changes experienced in the United States during the early twenties.

In his book The Responsibilities of Power 1900-1929 historian George H. Knowles outlines some of the main features of the economic and social change.(8) Agriculture during the period 1900 - 1920 enjoyed a "golden age" in which domestic and foreign markets expanded. Farm produce in 1899 realized $4.7 billion, in 1920 $19.3 billion. In 1900 60% of the population was rural; in 1920 48.8%. In the field of industry the number of wage earners doubled; wages increased five-fold; and the value of output in production increased six times. The United States enjoyed increased wealth during the first twenty years of the twentieth century. The national wealth in 1900 was $88.5 billion; in 1917 it was $351.7 billion. Knowles attributes the increased wealth to the discovery of new sources of power, which led to advances in technology and a resultant increase in goods and services.

Demographically, the population increased by 30 million during the period 1900 to 1920, with a large migration of Negroes to the Northern States and an influx of immigrants. In fact, from 1900 to 1915 the influx of foreign-born immigrants occurred at the rate of one million a year. By 1910 much of the internal mobility in the United States was a direct result of growing job opportunities in industry.

The long term process of urbanization accelerated, during the period under review, in response to industrial and commercial expansion. The urban population grew by nearly 40% during 1900 - 1910, and by nearly 30% in the following ten years. Two fifths of the new city dwellers were immigrants; one third came from rural areas. The greatest concentrations of urban population occurred North of the Ohio and east of Mississipi. Cities were unprepared for the massive influx of population, and widespread slum areas developed. Of the influx of millions to the northern cities, Knowles says: they brought with them "codes of morality ... imbued in them by a still vigorous evangelical protestantism." (9)

As early as 1897, President Woodrow Wilson had said that it was no longer easy to be human, for "the once simple world" was being transformed.(10)

Wright City, in which Niebuhr was born, was populated largely by German immigrants. The city's population felt so remote from the rest of America that many people did not bother to learn

English. They preferred the German of their own or their forebears pre-immigrant status.

Pastor Gustav Niebuhr was not unlike the people of Wright City. His services were conducted wholly in German. The Evangelical church which Gustav Niebuhr served was basically Lutheran, an offshoot of the Prussian Church Union, "transported to the U.S. Middle West as the result of an early nineteenth century immigration from Germany."(11) In 1934 it joined a Calvinist group to become the Evangelical and Reformed Church and, in 1956, amalgamated with the Congregational Christian Churches, to become The United Church of Christ.

One of Gustav Niebuhr's younger colleagues recalls the early days of the Evangelical synod: "(Ours)... was a small and unknown group in the total picture of American church life... All its congregations were German speaking or at best bilingual. This German origin constituted a kind of voluntary and also involuntary social and religious segregation."(12)

Gustav Niebuhr trained for the ministry at his denomination's Eden Theological Seminary. Reinhold was deeply influenced by his father. "The first formative religious influence on my life", writes Niebuhr, "was my father, who combined a vital personal piety with a complete freedom in his theological studies."(13) He combined erudition, piety, and a love for "American egalitarianism and American freedom",(14) read Greek or Hebrew every day from his Polyglot Bible, and studied Macaulay because of his interest in history.

Recalling the influence his father had on his thinking, Niebuhr writes:

> "My father regarded the tyrannical father as a symbol of the whole German system and was rather more than most immigrants who arrived after 1848, ideologically oriented... and gained a great interest in Lincoln... (which) lasted throughout his life. He was deeply religious and I inherited interest in religion or rather religious conviction from him..."(15)

Niebuhr received encouragement and help from his father during his adolescence, when he had decided to enter the ministry. He gave his son Greek lessons every Saturday morning, and encouraged him to read widely. A student of Harnack himself, his father

"introduced his sons and daughter to the thought of Harnack without fully sharing the liberal convictions of that theologian", recalls Niebuhr.(16)

After four years at Elmhurst, Reinhold went to Eden Theological Seminary. One of his contemporaries writes of that period at Eden: "... our very inadequate and almost totally unrelated training must be heavily discounted as an environmental factor in Reinie's development."(17) Niebuhr's own assessment of that training is:

> "The seminary was influential in my life primarily because of the creative effect upon me of the life of a very remarkable man, Dr S.D.Press, who combined a childlike innocency with a rigorous scholarship in Biblical and systematic subjects."(18)

Niebuhr's biographer tells us that Dr Press, on the other hand, was so impressed in his turn with Reinhold that he started saving his letters from that time, and forty years later shared them for the compilation of data for Niebuhr's biography.

Whilst at Eden Niebuhr's father died after a severe attack of diabetes. Only a short while later the discovery was made of the insulin that could have saved his life. The small, crucial time-lag between Gustav Niebuhr's death and the discovery of insulin, is characteristic of the breathtaking changes that occurred during the early years of Reinhold's life.

During his stay at Eden, the 'unsinkable' Titanic, pride of the seas, went down with over a thousand people drowned. Niebuhr's reaction to this disaster was a sign of things to come. One of his fellow students writes of their different reaction to the disaster:

> "I was deeply moved by the sheer numbers of this awful tragedy. Reinie kept commenting on the loss of some of the leaders in the realms of art and science... I protested that all men are equally precious in the sight of God. But he insisted with his passion for realism that the loss of men and women who are making a great contribution to the welfare of their fellows is infinitely greater than the loss of the rank and file of the human family. For me, democracy and religious concern... were equated with a kind of hazy egalitarianism, but Reinie's keener insight recognized an aristocracy within the framework of democracy, namely an aristocracy of character and service to humanity."(19)

Niebuhr's denomination had a rule that upon graduation,

ministers were sent to any congregation which the synodical president might assign to them. However, with the blessing of his mother, and after months of negotiation with his Church, Niebuhr took up a scholarship he had applied for at Yale Divinity School. He applied for a scholarship to Yale because, as he says, "the standards of Union Theological Seminary were too high for me... Yale, at that time, had different ones because the divinity school was building itself up numerically..."(20)

Niebuhr went to Yale conscious that he lacked an adequate education, even after his years at Elmhurst and Eden. Writing to Professor Press at the time, he says: "I thought once that I lacked only the B.A., but I have found since that I lack the things that make up a B.A.: philosophy, ethics, science and a real course in English... I have bluffed my way through pretty well by industrious reading, but I feel all the time like a mongrel among thoroughbreds and that's what I am."(21)

At Yale Niebuhr had his first taste of university life and good library facilities. He enrolled as a Bachelor of Divinity candidate, completed the course requirements, and wrote a thesis on "The Validity of Religious Experience and the Certainty of Religious Knowledge." The Dean of Divinity accepted his application to the graduate school enrolling him as a "special student", with the proviso that he maintained an A level average. This concession was made because his pre-Yale training had, by the standards of that institution, not been adequate. Niebuhr maintained the required level, and after two years, during which time he held a part-time job in a small nearby church, he graduated with a Master of Arts degree.

His years at Yale influenced Niebuhr a great deal. He found himself part of a minority there. He was a Middle Westerner in the heart of the insular East; he was financially impoverished among the majority of wealthy students; he was a divinity student in what was largely a secular university; and he was of German descent in an area where German was almost unknown, and at a time when, because of the Kaiser and the first World War, the word was almost synonomous with enemy.

In 1913 Yale Divinity School was making a serious attempt to relate theology to contemporary society. G.C.Keller, writing on

that period at Yale, points out that Biblical studies were expected to be scientific, and contemporary conditions were analysed in courses like: 'The Systematic Science of Society' and 'The Modern Labour Movement'.(22)

In a letter to Professor Press, Niebuhr listed some of the books which he considered worth reading at the time(23) and includes some comments on them.

Sebatier:	Outlines of a Phil. of Religion (the best of them all)
James:	Varieties of Religious Experience
James:	Will to believe
Hocking:	The Meaning of God in Human Experience
Royce:	The Problem of Christianity
Browne:	Theism
Martineau:	Types of Ethical Theories
Huba (sic):	Psychological Study of Religion(very negative)

Working mainly under the supervision of Douglas C Macintosh, Niebuhr worked on his Master's thesis: "The Contribution of Christianity to the Doctrine of Immortality." He received the M.A. degree in 1915, and although pressed by Macintosh, decided not to pursue doctoral studies at Yale.

After completing his studies at Yale, Niebuhr was posted to a newly organized parish in the city of Detroit. He was, however, worried about the prospect of going there for two reasons. He had incurred debts during his years at Yale, and did not know how he was going to live on the $900 per annum offered by the Bethel Church. He felt he had to do his share of assisting the family, and wanted his mother to accompany him. Bingham records that out of the $900 he had to pay $40 in rent. "How could you eat?", a young minister asked years later. Niebuhr shrugged, "We couldn't, much."(24)

But he was more worried about the attitude the Church would take to his liberal views: In a letter, he writes:

> "I am a good deal worried about my future. In the first place... I have not gone for two years to Yale without absorbing a good deal of its liberalism... I am a good deal worried that my liberalism will not at all be liked in our church and will jeopardize any influence which I might in time have won in our church..."(25)

In his Intellectual Autobiography, Niebuhr speaks of the two professors at Yale who influenced him most. One was Frank C. Porter,

his New Testament theologian, whose "lucid and comprehensive exposition of New Testament theology made a tremendous impression... the notes I took in his classes are the only school notes I still preserve."(26)

Douglas C. Macintosh, his professor of systematic theology, "opened the whole world of philosophical and theological learning to me.... (he) had written a most comprehensive survey of epistemological theories. I was thrilled at first with this encyclopedic knowledge; but, unfortunately, in time philosophical theories bored me, though I was subsequently to discover that Macintosh's challenge of the age-old alliance between the Christian faith and philosophical idealism was important."(27)

Accompanied by his mother, Reinhold Niebuhr took up his first and only pastoral charge, at the age of twenty three. He describes his theological position on going to Detroit in his unpublished Later Leaves in this way:

> "I... had come to the pastorate with simple Christian 'liberal' moralism. I regarded love as the answer to every moral problem. It is, indeed,... But in the process of building communities every impulse of love must be transformed into an impulse of justice."(28)

What were the sources of what Niebuhr calls his "simple Christian 'liberal' moralism"? In part the answer lies in his upbringing within the conservative and somewhat isolated Evangelical church; and the influence of his father who combined religious conviction with an openness of mind. In part it lies in his exposure at Yale to the prevailing liberal and pragmatic climate of the early twenties in the United States, which the historian George Knowles characterizes as a "revolt against formalism".(29) In part the answer lies in the influence of the Social Gospel movement on Niebuhr, particularly in his early days in Detroit. We will examine the sense in which Niebuhr is heir to the Social Gospel movement when we discuss his Detroit period in more detail. Since the roots of that movement may be traced back to Harnack, it is important now to examine briefly his influence on American liberal theology.

The effect of the theological position represented by Adolf von Harnack on Continental and American theology is important to

note at this point because both Barth and Niebuhr reacted strongly against that position. Harnack (1851-1930), the German church historian and theologian, was an outstanding Patristic scholar. His seven-volume History of Dogma traced the history of Christian doctrine to the Reformation, with special attention given to the early period. Pre-eminently a church historian, this work nevertheless reflects his own theological position, which in turn owes much to the work of Albrecht Ritschl (1822 - 1889). Ritschl had argued that religious faith was not reducible to other forms of human experience. In a scientific age he hoped to show that religion has an empirical rather than a metaphysical base. By this we mean that Ritschl understood Christian faith not as the apprehension of a series of facts by rational means, nor as a metaphysical expression of the nature of God. His reaction against metaphysics and subjectivism was prompted by his belief that our knowledge of God depends on His revelation of Himself in history. A key concept of his theology is his notion of Werturtheile or "value-judgements". Theological statements are judgements of value in the sense that a statement about redemption through the death of Jesus, for example, is more than an historical statement. It is "an expression of the 'Revelational-value' (Offenbarungswert) of Christ for the community which trusts in him as God."(30) The so-called "Ritschlian school' is characterized by its stress on ethics and on the Church as the immediate subject of God's revelation, and by its repudiation of metaphysics when understood as the project for arguing the existence of God on rational grounds. According to H.R. Mackintosh: "By insisting that the Christian mind must at every point of religious belief be guided solely by the revelation of God in Christ, Ritschl did his utmost to expel any and every form of Speculative Rationalism; and it may well be that the future historian will reckon this to have been his best service to theology."(31)

Harnack was a student of Ritschl, and has described him as the latest of the Church Fathers. Harnack regarded metaphysics as an alien intrusion in Christian theology from Greek sources; an intrusion he called "Helenization." In 1900 he published What Is Christianity? in which he stressed the ethical teaching of Christianity to the exclusion of doctrinal formulations of the faith. In this book Harnack focusses attention on the message of

Jesus, and, inter alia, argues that the fact:

> "that the whole of Jesus's message may be reduced to these two heads - God as the Father, and the human soul so ennobled that it can and does unite with Him - shows us that the Gospel... is, therefore, religion itself."(32)

In keeping with the spirit of Neo-Protestantism, Harnack argues that the object of religious knowledge is not rational, and can only be expressed in symbolic form. The ultimate test of the truth of the Gospel is that those who believe, love God and love their neighbour as themselves. Says Harnack:

> "The real difficulties in the way of the religion of the Gospel remain the old ones. In the face of them we can 'prove' nothing, for our proofs are only variations of our convictions. But the course which history has taken has surely opened up a wide province, in which the Christian sense of brotherhood must give practical proof of itself... I mean the social province."(33)

For Harnack the task of "scientific" theology is to master the object of its knowledge, which is the content of the message of the Gospel. On the question of the relation of the Gospel to what Harnack calls the "social province", he reflects what he himself calls "the rationalizing, subjective-religious line of Protestantism."(34) By this he appears to mean that line in Protestantism which emphasizes the need to give reasons for 'the hope that is within us', whilst at the same time not attempting to "prove" the truth of Christian faith; since "our proofs are only variations of our convictions". The Gospel, says Harnack:

> "makes its appeal to the inner man, who,... always remains the same... 'My kingdom is not of this world'; it is no earthly kingdom that the Gospel establishes. Not only are these words inconsistent with such a political theocracy as the Pope aims at setting up and with all worldly dominion; they go much further, and forbid all direct formal interference of religion in worldly affairs. What the Gospel does say is this:... There is only one relation and one idea which you must not violate... to be a child of God and a citizen of His kingdom, and to exercise love."(35)

In the "social province" the Christian can expect no direct help from the Gospel - only the ideal of love for God and love for neighbour:

> "How you are to maintain yourself in this life on earth, and in what way you are to serve your

> neighbour, is left to you and your own liberty of action... Then let us fight, let us struggle, let us get justice for the oppressed... but do not let us expect the Gospel to afford us any direct help..."(36)

(3) MINISTRY IN DETROIT: (1915 - 1928)

When Niebuhr went to Detroit armed with a "simple Christian 'liberal' moralism" - not unlike that ennunciated by Harnack - he discovered that in the face of the challenges in that growing city such moralism was grossly inadequate.

Part of the liberal teaching at Yale, about which Niebuhr had expressed the fear that his Church would not take kindly, was the American Social Gospel tradition, associated with the name of Walter Rauschenbusch whose A Theology For The Social Gospel, based on lectures given at Yale, was published just prior to his death in 1918. The roots of the Social Gospel tradition in America may be traced from Kant, Ritschl, Harnack, to Rauschenbusch.

(a) The Social Gospel

The editors of Christian Ethics, Waldo Beach and H. Richard Niebuhr record the influence of the Social Gospel on Reinhold Niebuhr:

> "Theologically trained in the American Social Gospel tradition, Niebuhr found his first parish in industrial Detroit in the 1920's. Here he discovered the confident message of the Social Gospel inadequate to the plight of the times, just as Rauschenbusch fifty years earlier had found pietism irrelevant to the needs of the New York slums... (But) he has remained in part a child of the Social Gospel, though indeed a rebellious child, and heir to the prophetic and social passion of Rauschenbusch..."(37)

According to Beach and H.R.Niebuhr, the Social Gospel movement, rooted as it was in Continental theology, began its definite rise in America "after the Civil War. This era of mechanization and industrialization, with the enormous upswing of urban population swollen by immigration... brought problems of social maladjustment and poverty to which the traditional message of Protestant churches seemed remote and inept."(38) Among the theological

assumptions of the movement were the assertion of the prophetic understanding of the character of God; that God is at work within history for the building of His Kingdom.

This Kingdom, however, comes by evolutionary growth in the view of the social gospel. The movement found an evolutionary theory of history "more plausible" than that of the traditional creeds, because it was confident that history is progressing toward a better social order. "To the extent that men apply Christian ideals to their public and private lives, the Kingdom will come. This philosophy of history gives to the Social Gospel its great hope and impetus for moral endeavour,"(39) is the way Beach and H.R.Niebuhr characterize its emphasis.

Rauschenbusch sought to give a "social dimension" to the concepts of sin and salvation, as the following passage indicates:

> "The new thing in the social gospel is the clearness and insistence with which it sets forth the necessity and the possibility of redeeming the historical life of humanity from the social wrongs which now pervade it and which act as temptations and incitements to evil and as forces of resistance to the powers of redemption. Its chief interest is concentrated on those manifestations of sin and redemption which lie beyond the individual soul."(40)

A key concept in the "redeeming (of) historical life" is the Kingdom of God. "This doctrine", says Rauschenbusch, "is itself the social Gospel" and theology must "give it a central place and revise all other doctrines so that they will articulate organically with it."(41) The Kingdom of God "is divine in its origin, progress and consummation"; it is "necessary to establish that organic union between... theology and ethics"; and it "contains the teleology of the Christian religion. It translates theology from the static to the dynamic." The Kingdom is both present and future; it is "humanity organized according to the will of God". And since "love is the supreme law of Christ" it "implies a progressive reign of love in human affairs." The Kingdom "is not confined within the limits of the Church and its activities. It embraces the whole of human life."(42)

Niebuhr's years in Detroit caused him to become increasingly critical of the prevailing spirit of optimism which characterized the United States in the 1920's. "There was, as a matter of fact,"

he says, "little difference between secular and Christian versions of the optimism of nineteenth-century culture."(43) Niebuhr's critical attitude was influenced largely by his experiences in Detroit.

During the thirteen years he was pastor of the Bethel Evangelical Church Detroit city grew threefold; from half a million to a million and a half. The Bethel congregation grew tenfold; from 65 to 656. Within four years of Niebuhr's arrival the congregation was able to stand on its own feet financially and no longer needed missionary grants from the Central Church. One year later, in 1919, the congregation voted to discontinue the use of German in services, being the first in the Michigan district of the Evangelical Synod to do so.

Within seven years of Niebuhr's arrival in Detroit, the Bethel congregation had moved from its $8,500 chapel to an imposing new building on the West Boulevard costing over $128,000. By the time Niebuhr left, the annual expenses of the congregation had grown from $957 to $18,397; and its benevolence from $75 to $3889. The growth of the congregation was in keeping not only with the growth of the city itself, but with growth in Church life in America. Historian W.W.Street, has shown that the ten years after the first World War saw a period of unprecedented growth in Church life in the United States when more costly churches were built than at any previous time.(44)

Niebuhr's life-long involvement in social ethics, both practically and theoretically, can be traced to his early days in Detroit. For example, in an entry in 1920, Niebuhr writes in Leaves:

> "I am really beginning to like the ministry. I think since I have stopped worrying so much about the intellectual problems of religion and have begun to explore some of its ethical problems there is more of a thrill in preaching. The real meaning of the gospel is in conflict with most of the customs and attitudes of our day at so many places that there is adventure in the Christian message..."(45)

The growth of the automobile industry, and particularly the Ford Motor Company, and its effects on the growing numbers of workers in that industry gave Niebuhr ample opportunity to explore ethical problems. What Bingham has called Niebuhr's "fight with Ford" is characteristic of his view of social ethics in his Detroit years.

(b) Fight With Ford

When Niebuhr went to Detroit the automobile industry, in particular the Ford Motor Company, was just beginning the rapid expansion which was to make Detroit the motor capital of the country. The expansion of this industry affected the growth of the city which, as we have seen, grew from a half a million to a million and a half in population.

"The resulting facts", writes Niebuhr, "determined my development more than any books which I may have read. For on the one hand my congregation grew... and it numbered in the flock everything from auto workers to two millionaires. On the other hand, the social realities of a rapidly expanding industrial community, before the time of the organization of the workers... forced me to reconsider the liberal and highly moralistic creed which I had accepted as tantamount to the Christian faith."(46)

"I cut my eyeteeth fighting Ford", says Niebuhr of his conflict with Henry Ford.(47) His fight with Ford arose because as a minister Niebuhr was worried about the plight of the workers, many of whom were in his congregation. He was also concerned to "debunk" the moral pretensions of Henry Ford, whose five-dollar-a-day wage gave him a world-wide reputation for generosity. "I happened to know that some of his workers had an inadequate annual wage, whatever the pretensions of the daily wage may have been. Many of them lost their homes in the enforced vacations, which became longer and longer until the popular demand for the old Model T suddenly subsided, and forced a lay-off of almost a year for 'retooling'."(48)

According to Allan Nevins' Ford: The Times, The Man, The Company, Detroit was well known as "one of the open shop capitals of the land". There was hostility between its industrialists and unions. It had a large resource of immigrant labour. There was widespread use of adolescent workers. Scant attention was paid to safety; Nevins shows that the rate of industrial accidents was higher in the United States generally at that time than in Germany or Great Britain.(49)

Ford disapproved of the 'piece-work' prevalent at that time, and in its place developed the assembly line which has since been

adopted for mass production methods all over the world. In the interest of greater efficiency and faster production, 'efficiency experts' were hired. These Niebuhr called "a group of resourceful engineers who understood little about human relations, who analysed and directed workers as if they were machines. Problems of injury and age were the workers' problems not his, Ford maintained.(50)

It should be noted that the developments and the difficulties described here in relation to the motor industry took place years before the Wagner Act of 1935 guaranteed the right of collective bargaining by labour unions. These problems and difficulties also occurred before industrial unions took the place of craft unions in mass-production industries; before child labour was outlawed; before unemployment compensation was statutory; and before welfare payments saved unemployed workers from starving.

Henry Ford's aim was to get the price of motor cars down so that more people, including Ford workers, could buy them. To this end he increased not only production, but wages. When he needed capital for expansion, he cut dividends rather than wages. In 1914, Ford announced to the press "that the greatest and most successful automobile company in the world" was inaugurating "the greatest revolution in the matter of rewards for workers ever known in the industrial world."(51)

Much of the press comment on Ford's wage policy at the time was "ecstatic" as Nevins points out. Later appraisal of his policy was also favourable. Bingham quotes R.L.Bruckberger, writing in 1959, as an example:

> "I consider 1914 a momentous year in history... the year in which Henry Ford, by... more than doubling wages at one stroke, finally freed the worker from 'proletarian' servitude and lifted him above the 'minimum subsistence' wage..."(52)

Ford also took other actions which, in the light of history, were forward looking. He hired White and Negro people to work together. He also employed handicapped persons, and people with gaol records.

Ford's 'Five Dollar A Day' wage was almost twice the average wage at other automobile shops in Detroit. His innovation was, he believed, an example of "profit sharing and efficiency engineering".(53) He believed that this policy was motivated by two

basic aims.

> "The first was to increase the purchasing power and living standards of the worker by paying him higher wages well above the subsistence level, on the principle that a mass production economy requires the dynamics of high consumption.
>
> The other and more immediate reason was to reduce labour turnover and improve worker discipline in his own plants at a time when production speed-ups based on mass moving assembly were becoming more commonplace."(54)

Reinhold Niebuhr vigorously attacked Ford on three grounds: his moral pretensions; his five-day-week policy; and his Five Dollar A Day wage programme. Writing in The Christian Century in December 1926, Niebuhr asked "How Philanthropic is Henry Ford?" Is America justified in acclaiming Ford as a "hero" and a "humanitarian"? Ford argued that an adequate wage gives the worker security against unemployment and old age. An adequate wage obviates any necessity for philanthropy; for this reason Ford refused to support any charitable agencies.

Citing case histories to prove his point, Niebuhr shows that high wages do not protect the worker through periods of unemployment. In fact "unemployed Ford Workers are the heaviest charge upon Detroit charities of any single class of citizens". Over fifty percent of the beneficiaries of some charities are Ford workers. If you employ a man at Ø5 a day, and then only employ him three days a week, his salary is below subsistence level, and his family is dependent on charity. Apart from the few thousand highly skilled workers in Ford plants, "it is hardly possible to find a Ford worker who earned more than Ø1500 during the past year (1926)", says Niebuhr.(55)

Niebuhr showed that the most important reason for the failure of the Ford five-dollar-a-day, five-day-week, is that 85% of the men on production lines "are in the uniform predicament of having only four days work per week if they are fortunate". A five-dollar day wage in a shrinking working week means that total wages earned over a year are below a minimum subsistence wage.

Niebuhr also attacked what he called "our incompetent social conscience" which can herald the automobile industry as a "model of human industrial strategy" in spite of its "distressing social consequences". Here, writes Niebuhr, "is a rather striking

personality, with more than ordinary industrial success, with humane impulses, now slightly corrupted, and with a social philosophy not advanced beyond the doctrinaire individualism of the nineteenth century; and yet the world imagines that he represents something new in industrial ethics!"(56)

An opportunity came in 1926 for Niebuhr to place himself publicly on the side of the worker in Detroit. The American Federation of Labour (AFL) arranged a convention in the city in the hope of attracting the industrial worker to its own craft unions. Churches were asked to invite labour speakers to their Sunday evening services. But the Detroit Board of Commerce asked for the withdrawal of these invitations. "The fact is that all of the churches withdrew their invitations in a rather abject way. That made me a little sick about the obvious subservience of the churches to the business interest", says Niebuhr. The only two churches that refused to withdraw were my little church and the Unitarian Church". (57)

The AFL effort was a vain one, however. A full decade was to pass before industrial workers were organised in industrial rather than craft unions. The United Automobile Workers' Union was such a union. It is to Niebuhr's credit, and, an example of his foresight, that he recognized the need for such unions years before they became a reality. In 1927, he wrote:

> "For years the regular agencies of organized labour (like the AFL) despaired of organizing Ford workers. Composed of foreigners and country boys who had little appreciation of the basic problems of industrial life, all efforts to organize them failed dismally. The time would now seem ripe for a real organizing effort... A new labour strategy will be necessary for this task...(or) the revolutionary radicals who are now the only spokesmen of the discontent of Ford workers will gain an influence out of all proportion to their qualities of leadership."(58)

Walter Reuther who became one of the key leaders in the powerful United Automobile Workers' Union (UAW) and the Congress of Industrial Organizations (CIO), arrived in Detroit shortly before Niebuhr left. He later paid this tribute to Niebuhr:

> "... I was much impressed and attracted to him as a person by his ability to relate religious, ethical and moral standards to practical, political and

> social problems... Reinie Niebuhr's high sense of social idealism as applied to the challenging problems of our times spoke the language that I understood during my formative years and the years when I was involved in the early beginnings in the United Automobile Workers."(59)

As we attempt to evaluate Niebuhr's 'fight' with Ford from the perspective of history, certain important learnings for Christian social ethics emerge. Ford's struggle to produce a 'car for the multitude', utilising technological advances and the technique of mass-production, and Niebuhr's struggle for labour reforms to ease the lot of the worker in the burgeoning automobile industry, can be described as a microcosm of what was happening in the "progressive era" of American history. In the words of historians Morris and Greenleaf:

> "Americans in the progressive era witnessed not only a reformist assault upon the social evils of large-scale industrialism, but new advances in the industrialising process that raised levels of productivity and the general standard of living to new heights."(60)

Ford was in the forefront of the mass-production revolution which ushered in a new epoch in industrial technology. The Ford Motor Company pioneered the moving assembly line in the motor industry, and by 1914 accounted for forty-five percent of the total automobile output. The ungainly but durable Model T Ford, which incidentally Niebuhr enjoyed owning, had achieved global use. The phenomenal growth of the automobile industry was in a large measure responsible for the revolution in American consumption; for it not only changed the pattern of living of Americans, it also gave birth to changes in the industrial field; as auxiliary industries grew up around the production of the automobile.

Ford took other actions which, in the light of history, were forward-looking, although at the time they were condemned by many of his fellow entrepeneurs. He hired Whites and Negroes to work together at a time when racial tension was rife. He employed handicapped persons. He did not turn a prospective employee away simply on the grounds of a gaol record. His wage policy, and his five day week were progressive for a time when the industry was in its infancy.

The advent of the motor car called into being a vast grouping of satellite industries "that eventually made one out of every seven jobs in the national economy directly or indirectly dependent upon the motor car and its use".(61) "It is doubtful", wrote historian Harold Faulkner, "if any mechanical invention in the history of the world has influenced in the same length of time the lives of so many people in an important way as the motor car."(62) It is to Henry Ford's credit that he was in the forefront of this technological revolution.

Reinhold Niebuhr shared many of the characteristics of the reformist tradition of the progressive era in American history. According to Morris and Greenleaf, this reformist tradition had a number of discernible characteristics. It was an urban middle-class response to the abuses and evils that arose in the wake of uncontrolled industrialization and metropolitan expansion. As such it sought to improve the quality of life of an urban-industrial society which had not heeded the social costs of rapid industrialization. The reformist was a pragmatist, confident that practical solutions could be devised; he was an activist, believing that spirited individual and collective action could bring about reform; and he was a moralist, hating injustice and believing in the soundness of American democracy.(63)

In Detroit, Niebuhr used his considerable gifts to work for reforms in labour policies, and in the field of race relations. To his great credit he was able to identify and expose some of the deep flaws in the life of that burgeoning city. In that process he came to see the inadequacies of his own "Christian 'liberal' moralism" which believed that love was the answer to every moral problem: "In the process of building communities every impulse of love must be transformed into an impulse of justice."(64)

Much has been written of Niebuhr as 'prophet', and nowhere is this more evident than in his fight with Ford in Detroit. In the tradition of Amos he brought his gifts as a speaker and writer to bear on injustices that came in the wake of the rapidly growing motor industry, and worked actively for much needed reforms.

Given the historical situation, it is understandable that Niebuhr should have given his energies to what might be termed the 'texture' of life in the Detroit of his day. One must question,

however, whether that texture did not blind him to the larger historical events which occurred in that period. As we saw in our first chapter, the prophetic tradition of the Old Testament took history seriously, and concerned itself with discerning God's activities and purposes in history. In this prophetic tradition, events of history were judged in terms of how men understood the character of God in the light of the Exodus-Sinai complex of events in their past history. Given this basic clue to God's will and person, men sought to discern what God was doing in the contemporary situation that they might work with Him.

One can understand how Niebuhr, who stood in the biblical-Christian tradition, was motivated to work for justice in the social order in Detroit, and to denounce a system which caused so much human suffering. But how is it that Niebuhr could see no good in the advent of the motor industry which created new job-opportunities for a growing population; gave to the average American a new mobility; and provided much of the impetus needed to weld the automobile workers into a self-confident, organized group? Is there nothing of the creative activity of God in this 'mass-production revolution'? Did not the very suffering and injustice against which Niebuhr fought, provide the stimulus to change the status of workers - comprised of "foreigners and country boys" - into a powerful organized group able to negotiate with the captains of industry from a position of strength? Is there not something of the creative activity of God, albeit through suffering, in this remarkable transformation in the status of the worker?

Niebuhr's pessimism about individual and collective man, and his sense of impending catastrophe, during his Detroit years and his early years at Union, caused him to condemn what Schleisinger has called "the most massive and brilliant period of political and economic experimentation in American history".(65) Later Niebuhr was to reveal his characteristic 'courage to change', but at this point in his life he was unable to credit the revolutionary changes taking place as good, let alone as reflecting God's creating activity.

In Detroit Niebuhr challenged Ford and worked for justice. From Detroit Niebuhr went to New York, and the Union Theological Seminary, where he was to devote the rest of his active life to the issues of social ethics.

(4) FORMATIVE DECADE AT UNION: (1929 - 1939)

Niebuhr's life in New York was even more hectic than it had been in Detroit. It has been said that during his active life he worked a 17-hour day. His book-lined office in the seminary tower was always open to students, and was the scene of intense discussion with colleagues in those formative years at Union. Reflecting on his appointment to the newly-created Chair of Christian Ethics, Niebuhr indicates the sense in which his first ten years were formative:

> "This was a hazardous venture, since my reading in the parish had been rather undisciplined and I had no scholarly competence in my field, not to speak of the total field of Christian theology. My practical interests and the devoting of every week-end to college preaching prevented any rapid acquisition of competence in my ostensible speciality. It was therefore a full decade before I could stand before a class and answer the searching questions of the students... without the sense of being a fraud who pretended to a larger and more comprehensive knowledge than I possessed. Meanwhile, the pressure of academic discipline and my companionship with the distinguished members of the Union faculty did serve to introduce me to the main outlines of Biblical faith and to the classical texts of Christian theology."(66)

(a) Decade Of Prosperity

If Niebuhr's life was hectic and his thought undergoing change, so was life in New York City and every other major city in the United States during that time. In the '20's wrote F. Scott Fitzgerald, the country went on "the greatest, gaudiest spree in history."(67) By the time Niebuhr went to Union, this "spree" was reaching a crescendo. What Fitzgerald called the "Jazz Age", was described by historians as the "Decade of Prosperity".

The national income grew from $70.2 billion in 1919 to $87.8 billion in 1929. The impetus to prosperity was provided by industrial expansion. Labour production climbed 35% between 1922 and 1925, the value of manufactured goods rose from $60 to $68 billion between 1925 and 1929. The reasons for this expansion can be ascribed to the widescale use of mass production techniques and the intensive use of the principles of 'scientific management'

introduced by Frederick Taylor. In 1929, about $200 million was being spent on industrial research.(68)

Rapid industrial growth brought with it inevitable changes in American society. In the words of Morris and Greenleaf:

> "Many of the striking changes in American society during the '20's were produced by a tidal wave of urbanization that overwhelmed the cultural values of an older rural society.... An urban gain of twenty-seven million residents accounted for the overwhelming share of the nett increase of thirty-one million in the national population between 1910 and 1930... Rural America stood for tradition orthodoxy, conformism, and provincialism. Urban America represented novelty, experimentation, pluralism, and diversity. It was a time of contrast and conflict."(69)

These changes had their effect on the arts; on the music of 'the roaring twenties'; on leisure with the growth of the cinema, theatre, the radio; on the growth of the newspaper industry. New possibilities opened up for travel when in 1927 Lindbergh accomplished his transatlantic solo flight.

Tremendous advances were made in the field of education. By 1930, 81.3% of the school age population were in elementary and secondary schools, one out of seven of college age population attended institutions of higher learning, and 30% of the total national income was being spent on schooling - almost half the total world expenditure on education.

In the light of these advances, one can understand the pride of accomplishment in the Inaugural of President Herbert Hoover in 1929: "In no nation are the fruits of accomplishment more secure... I have no fears for the future of our country. It is bright with hope."(70)

Yet there were signs of inequity and maladjustment below the surface of the boom. Of the 27.5 million families in 1929, nearly half (43%) had incomes of less than $1500 per annum, and were therefore below the subsistence level. Some industries never shared the boom, like the shipbuilding, coal mining, and textile industries. Throughout the '20's the Mid-West experienced a farming depression. Unemployment was a Country-wide and constant spectre. In an average year during this decade three million people were unemployed, and at the height of the boom 1.5 million people were looking for work.

Niebuhr's biographer describes New York City at the time he went there:

> "The pre-Beats were staying up all night making whoopee, and the stock speculators were staying busy all day making money. The fashionable businessman wore a small round gold ornament on his watch chain bearing the pre-Peale positive thinking of the bearded Dr Coue: 'Every day in every way I'm getting better and better'. From the point of view of their profits this was exactly right."(71)

(b) The Big Crash Of 1929

Only eight months after the confident Inaugural of President Hoover, the golden bubble of the '20's burst when the bottom fell out of the Wall Street stock market in October, 1929. Two years before Niebuhr had criticized the evils of stock manipulation, in his Leaves. But neither he nor most others could foresee the extent and the duration of the depression that followed the crash, and which became a world-wide phenomenon. It was said of the Great Depression: "The United States sneezes and the world catches cold."

The stock market crash itself "was the result of uncontrolled speculation in securities fed by an easy money market and by a limitless optimism that a fast turnover on stock purchases in a rising market was a sure and easy path to wealth", according to Morris and Greenleaf.(72) The market value of all listed securities rose from $27 billion in 1925 to $87 billion by October 1, 1929.

The Great Depression was the product of a number of causes, domestic and foreign. One of the main domestic causes was the unequal distribution of national income, a disproportionately large share of which was going to the rich in the form of dividends and interest from industry and finance. Increases in wages and salaries never matched the gains in the national economy before 1929, so that by that year it is estimated that one quarter of the national income was going to five per cent of the American taxpayers.

The unequal distribution of the national income had an adverse effect upon consumer purchasing power. By 1929, there were signs that mass buying power was inadequate, in spite of the wider use of hire purchase. Sales of motor cars, radios, electrical

appliances, and other durable goods were declining. By 1929, at least one fifth of the nations' manufacturing resources were not being put to use.

If under-consumption had its effects on industrial activity, so did the price-rigidity during the '20's. Retail prices remained stable between 1922 and 1929. In theory at least, technological advances and higher labour productivity should have enabled business to cut prices, thereby enabling new buyers to enter the market. Yet this did not happen, and price rigidity became a major cause of mass unemployment.

Banking mismanagement and loose credit practices were another major reason for the depression. In the decade up to 1930, no fewer than two banks failed every day during the ten year period. In 1929 there were 25,330 banks in the United States, and many of them joined in the easy optimism of the '20's. No fewer than 3,750 banks failed in the year following the depression, and the loss to thousands of depositors was a savage blow not only to them, but to public confidence in business leaders.

The early thirties was a period of terrible and unrelieved poverty, and a time of terrible contrast; contrast between what people used to have and be, and what people now had and were. Between 1929 and 1932 the national income was slashed by half, the flow of investment capital into the economy by ninety per cent; industrial production fell by fifty-one per cent; industrial employment by 38% - so that at the peak of the depression between twelve and sixteen million people were unemployed. Every part of the United States showed the signs of misery and poverty taking their toll of human lives. In New York City 30% of the employable population was jobless, and because relief resources were severely strained some families were on a weekly relief of $2.39. The picture was the same in other American cities. Among the hardest hit were the already depressed farmers. Although their output dropped only six per cent between 1929 and 1932, the farm commodity prices dropped by a staggering 64%. Bitter poverty and sullen discontent replaced easy and confident optimism as the prevailing mood of the people.(72A)

The suffering and poverty moved many to a thorough-going criticism of the United States. For them the crisis was of such

proportions that only revolutionary changes could save the situation. They were convinced that the 'New Deal' policies of Franklin Roosevelt were not sweeping enough. In the week before the Inaugural of President Roosevelt the World Tomorrow (March, 1933) published the words of Reinhold Niebuhr that he has since publicly recanted: "capitalism is dying and... it ought to die".(73)

Murray Kempton, writing in 1955, recalled that Niebuhr's view was by no means unusual:

> "It is already hard to remember that only a generation ago, there were a number of Americans, of significant character and talent, who believed that our society was not merely doomed but undeserving of survival... its institutions seemed not just unworthy of preservation but crying out to be exterminated." (74)

John Bennett, who worked closely with Niebuhr at Union recalled in 1953:

> "the situation in which many of us lived twenty years ago... was the period of the great depression and at the time labour was mostly unorganized and... helpless to defend itself against unemployment... It was natural for Christians who were concerned about Social Action during that period to become convinced that nothing short of socialism was an adequate goal... Often it was enough to say: "Young man go left." A straight line to the left of the place where we were seemed a clear path of advance."(75)

Niebuhr was part of the discussions, and at times heated arguments, within academic and political groups, about the forms social change should take. Should the change be revolutionary, as the Communists and extreme Socialists argued? Or should it be evolutionary, resorting not to violence and blood-shed, but to other forms of power struggle in the interests of justice and a more-equal balance of power? And, when change had been achieved, how could the new society be prevented from developing other, perhaps equally unwanted, kinds of injustice?

Those concerned with the plight of the United States during the depression could see little hope in the policies of President Hoover, or in the philosophy which informed those policies. Hoover came to office at a time when America glorified the self-made successful businessman of humble origins. Hoover was a symbol of this American ideal. In his book American Individualism (1922), Hoover claimed that America had evolved a new concept of "progressive

individualism" which he defined as a moral dedication to equality of opportunity and the creed of service to the community. The dynamic force behind democratic progress was free enterprise; dependent on voluntary effort and self-reliant individualism.

Hoover "saw government as an impartial umpire, intervening only when it was absolutely necessary to preserve equal opportunity, to head off destructive class warfare, or to stimulate the broadest possible distribution of wealth by private means."(76) He saw government intervention as a last resort, and even when the depression was at its worst, he never re-examined his policies in the light of the changing situation.

In the eyes of Niebuhr and many others concerned to bring about real changes in the United States, the 'New Deal' policies of President Franklin Roosevelt - inaugurated in March, 1933 - offered little hope. Roosevelt came to office during the darkest days of the Great Depression. One out of every four workers in the United States was jobless; pay cuts had reached such proportions that in some industries workers were getting 5 to 10 cents an hour; and private welfare agencies could no longer cope so that all relief payments were being made by public treasuries.

After Roosevelt was elected he told a reporter: "The Presidency is not merely an administrative office. That's the least of it... It is pre-eminently a place of moral leadership. All our great Presidents were leaders of thought at times when historic ideas in the life of the nation had to be clarified." But Roosevelt was not doctrinaire, he was interested in results. The first phase of the New Deal (1933-35) involved measures of bold improvisation to deal with the emergency, aimed at stimulating the economy and providing federal relief for the impoverished unemployed. From the beginning the task of reform was never overlooked. The second phase of the New Deal (1935 - 1939) concentrated on the need for reform. The New Deal policies helped to pull the nation out of the depression, and pave the way forward. In the words of historians Morris and Greenleaf, the New Deal:

> "clarified the role of corporate capitalism in a mass democracy, ushered in the beginnings of the modern 'welfare state' in America, and marked the emergence of the administrative state - that is, centralised and positive government equipped with new tools of business regulation and social

> justice... it reconciled the claims of private enterprise and the general welfare without destroying basic freedoms. More immediately, by raising the battered social morale of the American people from the depths of the Great Depression, the New Deal restored popular faith in the capacity of democratic government to act decisively... in meeting a fearful crisis.(77)

It was not until the 40's that Niebuhr was able to give his support to the New Deal policies of Roosevelt. During the 30's Niebuhr shared with others the belief that the decadent features of capitalism would lead straight towards totalitarian facism. This sense of impending catastrophe is echoed in his Reflections on the End of an Era, published in 1934, in which he predicts that "the drift" toward fascism "is inevitable". Of this period in Niebuhr's thinking, Arthur Schleisinger Jr, says:

> "rebounding from the liberal belief in the inevitability of progress (Niebuhr) was all too susceptible to an equally extreme belief in the inevitability of catastrophe. The recurrence of the 'end of an era' formula in his writings of the thirties suggests his shocked fascination with the possibility of some basic turn, some drastic judgement in history." (78)

Confirmation of this view of impending catastrophe came from Niebuhr's contacts in Germany. Niebuhr had warned against Hitler's rise as early as 1933. His contacts with the German underground confirmed his worst fears. Here was a country in which the "drift" toward fascism was actually taking place. He immediately set about helping some of the victims of the rising Third Reich. Paul Tillich was one of the many distinguished refugees from Germany whom Niebuhr helped to settle in the United States. His chief contact with the Church in Germany was Dietrich Bonhoeffer. Bonhoeffer had met Niebuhr at Union. When, in 1939, he decided to leave Germany for good in protest against what was happening there, he met Niebuhr in England where he was staying prior to the Gifford Lectures. On hearing of Bonhoeffer's plans, Niebuhr immediately cabled Union asking that a post be found for him. An offer was made and Bonhoeffer went to New York, but later decided to return to Germany. "I made a mistake", he told Niebuhr the last time they saw each other. "The Christians in Germany will have to decide whether they wish to see the victory of Germany at the expense of civilization, or the victory of civilization at the

expense of Germany. I would be a coward if I didn't take part."(79)

Characteristically, Niebuhr's contacts with the German underground were not only religious. His secular contact was with Karl Frank (alias Paul Hagen). Hagen was a non-Christian who held together an underground movement of several hundred members "of the noncommunist left" which "succeeded in smuggling out of Germany many people who otherwise would have been tortured or killed. But its main emphasis was on staying put and surviving if possible... After the war many of these survivors were in a position to be of crucial help in the re-establishment of democracy in Germany. Although they shared different bases for the hope that Germany would one day be restored, Niebuhr and Hagen worked closely together. Later Hagen paid tribute to Niebuhr: "Whatever you may think about his thinking, he has the greatest integrity I have ever seen..." (80)

By December, 1940 Niebuhr's worst fears about what was happening in Europe caused him to come out strongly in favour of American participation in the World War. Writing in The Christian Century Niebuhr argued that, for political and religious reasons, America, which had thus far sought to maintain a position of neutrality, should become involved:

> "my primary difficulty in recent months has been, not the fear of becoming involved in war, but an uneasy conscience about living in security while other men are dying for principles in which I very much believe. The question whether or not we should declare war is therefore not primarily one of morals but of strategy in the sense that I believe we ought to do whatever has to be done to prevent the triumph of this intolerable tyranny."(81)

(c) Beyond Pacifism

The point of view expressed by Niebuhr in the passage we have just cited marks a radical departure from the pacifist position he held when he came to Union, and illustrates the sweeping changes he underwent in his formative years there.

When he came to New York he was a leading member of the Fellowship of Reconciliation, and for several years its chairman. The roots of his pacificism lay in his belief that war on a world scale was futile: that of all conceivable circumstances war was

the greatest evil - a position he could defend before the emergence of aggressive totalitarianism. As we have seen, in the face of fascism, Niebuhr favoured war to prevent "intolerable tyranny". His pacificism also stemmed from his idealism. All forms of coersion therefore created serious problems for him.

In 1932 Niebuhr broke with pacifism. He resigned from the Fellowship of Reconciliation, and helped found the Fellowship of Socialist Christians. The aim of this Fellowship was to explore, and express a form of Christian social action that was neither pacifist nor Marxist. Niebuhr's action in this regard arose out of his conclusion that there is no intrinsic moral difference between violence and non-violence. In 1932 he wrote:

> "The differences are pragmatic rather than intrinsic. The social consequences of the two methods are different, but the differences are in degree rather than in kind... Once the principle of coercion and resistance has been accepted as necessary to the social struggle, and pure pacifism has thus been abandoned, the differences between violence and non-violence lose some of their significance though they remain important..." (82)

Niebuhr became one of the sharpest critics of pacifism in Church in America, especially during the rise of the Third Reich when religious and political pacifists exerted pressure to keep the United States out of the War. But at the same time he acknowledged that the consistent pacifist has an important role in the Church as a judgement on those who are involved in the ambiguities of action and motive during a time of war.

Allowing the need for coercion and violence in the struggle for justice, Niebuhr placed the strongest strictures on morally permissible violence. "If violence can be justified at all, its terror must have the tempo of a surgeon's skill and healing must follow quickly upon its wounds."(83) He also believed that non-violent resistence, where this was possible, was morally superior because it "offers the largest possibilities for harmonious relationship with the moral and rational factors in social life."(84)

The Fellowship of Socialist Christians included a number of people who were influential on the American theological scene like Paul Tillich, H.Richard Niebuhr, Will Herberg and Liston Pope. The group frequently changed its name as its thinking changed in

relation to contemporary events. After the War it changed to Frontier Fellowship, and in 1951 merged with Christian Action. At the same time the Group's journal, which started out as Radical Religion in 1935, changed to Christianity and Society in 1940, until it merged under the direction of Niebuhr with Christianity and Crisis in 1956.

Tracing the history of the group John Hutchinson says that dropping the word 'Socialist' from its name, and 'Radical' from its journal, does not imply that its members were no longer radically critical of social institutions. It meant rather that the group had arrived at the conclusion "that Socialism in any precise sense of the word was no real cure for the ills of society."(85) That Niebuhr reached this conclusion is evidence of another major transition through which he passed during those formative years at Union.

(d) Beyond Socialism

Niebuhr's experience in Detroit and during the years of the Depression, together with his fears about the threat of war in Europe, caused him to discard his "simple 'liberal', Christian moralism". In doing so he embarked on a search for more adequate criteria for social choice. Reflecting on that search, Niebuhr recalls his:

> "rather violent, and sometimes extravagant, reaction to what I defined as the 'utopianism', i.e. the illusory idealist and individualistic character, of a Protestant and bourgeois culture before the world depression and two world wars... My reaction to bourgeois individualism prompted me to the error of using Marxist ideas to emphasize our new collective realities. I can only say in self-defence that, despite these absurd inconsistencies, I did succeed in escaping all the hallucinations of the left, who hailed the Russian Revolution as an emancipation for all mankind without noting that its annulment of freedom made the Stalinist despotism almost inevitable." (86)

During the early thirties Niebuhr wrote two books which reflect his acceptance of much of the Marxist diagnosis of the contemporary historical situation and its prescription for the problems of a decaying Capitalism. In 1932 he published Moral Man and Immoral Society. The thesis of this book is that a sharp

distinction must be drawn between the moral and social behaviour of individuals, and the moral and social behaviour of groups; and that this distinction shows up the inadequacy of an individualistic ethic for social and political problems. The book caused a great deal of controversy, both at home and abroad. In fact the first British edition appeared only in 1963, largely because theological publishers who might have been interested in it, maintained that it was not a Christian book. This view was shared by religious and secular idealists in America in the 30's at whom the book was aimed.

His other book, published in 1934 under the title Reflections on the End of an Era, expresses a sense of impending catastrophe largely informed by his reading of Marxist theory. The files of Radical Religion for which he wrote most of the editorials reflect his use of Marxism as an instrument of criticism of liberal Christianity, especially during the period 1935-1939. This journal which started in 1935 carried an initial editorial in which Niebuhr outlined his view of Marxism. After criticising liberal Christianity and reviewing the class struggle, Niebuhr goes on to say:

> "We believe that a capitalistic society is destroying itself and yet that it must be destroyed, lest it reduce, in the delirium of its disintegration, our whole civilization to barbarism. We believe that the social ownership of the means of production is the only basis of health and justice for a technical age. We believe that such a society can be established only through a social struggle and that in that struggle we ought to be on the side of the workingman. In these things we support socialism wholeheartedly." (87)

The use of the terms Marxism and Socialism need to be explained in relation to Niebuhr's thinking. Niebuhr's rejection of Capitalism and his advocacy of Socialism began earlier and outlasted the influence of Marxism on his thinking. His Socialism began in 1930 when he left the Fellowship of Reconciliation and lasted until about 1948 when he became aware of the problems of incentive and bureaucracy under Socialism during a visit to England. At the same time he came to accept the policies of the New Deal and Fair Deal in American politics as "the pattern of a creative revolution in America." By 1949 Niebuhr was saying: "Christian Socialism is no longer a viable compound."(88)

There was, however, a time during the 30's when Niebuhr's criticism of Capitalism went far beyond the acceptance of Socialism

as an alternative social system. He accepted with few reservations the Marxist reading of history, and adopted what he called a Christian Marxist position.(89) But, as we have seen, his reservations were important. By 1940 his reservations about Marxist 'utopianism', and its denial of freedom, made Niebuhr one of America's sharpest critics of Marxism. Writing in 1956, John Bennett says: "today Communism has no opponent in this country who knows how to deal it a deadlier blow on the intellectual and spiritual level."(90)

In the early 30's Niebuhr became practically involved in American political life. The Socialist Party, under the leadership of Norman Thomas, opposed the Republican and Democratic parties, and Niebuhr gave it his support. Thomas ran for President of the United States in 1932 and 1936 and Niebuhr supported him. In fact Niebuhr, somewhat unwillingly, was the Socialist Party candidate for the upper west side of New York City for the American Congress in 1930. He was an unwilling candidate because his name was put forward whilst he was abroad, in Russia, and his declination arrived too late. He was, however, heavily defeated in the election and gained only a few thousand votes.

Characteristically an activist, Niebuhr was involved in many programmes of social action - religious and secular - during the thirties and forties. Press once drew a distinction between Reinhold and his brother Richard by saying that if an organization was doing <u>one</u> good thing Reinhold would join it and Richard would not. During this period there were many permanent and <u>ad hoc</u> organizations; Niebuhr gave his support to over one hundred of them. Toward the end of the thirties, however, Niebuhr resigned from the Socialist Party largely because he was disillusioned by the ineffectiveness and isolationism of the party, but also because he was undergoing major changes in his thinking.

The invitation to give the Gifford Lectures led Niebuhr to do some intense theological reflection in preparation for the writing of his <u>The Nature and Destiny of Man</u>, the subject of those lectures. This reflection, together with the cumulative effect of being exposed at Union to the mainstream of Biblical and theological thinking, brought Niebuhr to the 'realist' position which he adopted during his mature years.

(5) NIEBUHR'S MATURE YEARS (1939 - 1971)

The preparation and delivery of his Gifford Lectures could not have come at a more significant moment for Niebuhr. They mark perhaps the most important turning point of his life because they enabled him to analyse and evaluate the dramatic processes of change that had characterized his life and thought up to the late 1930's. The theological frame of reference that was to mark his subsequent work was given expression in those lectures. The lectures could not have come at a more difficult time. The war, which the world vainly hoped would not materialize, had broken out. It is said that bombs fell in Edinburgh, in 1939, when Niebuhr gave his lectures, and that he did not even look up.

We describe the phase Niebuhr embarked upon with the delivery of the Gifford Lectures as his 'mature years'. We use this phrase to denote the notable consistency of approach which characterized this period of his life. Niebuhr has himself indicated that his apologetic and ethical interests did not change greatly in those years. In subsequent chapters we will examine the changes in emphasis discernible in his mature years, as he sought to grapple with contemporary problems. But these are changes in emphasis rather than fundamental changes of the sort that characterized his pre-Gifford years.

Writing in the Living Library Volume*on Reinhold Niebuhr, John Bennett describes the way in which he came to his mature position in these words:

> "Reinhold Niebuhr's social ethics are close to the center of his thought. The center is doubtless to be found in his theology; but, more than with other theologians, his theology has developed in response to his reading of contemporary history and to his reflections upon his own social and political responsibility in that history... His theology is in immediate control over his social ethics; but there is here no one-way deductive process, for in a large measure his theology has developed as he has sought answers to problems which first became acute to him as a teacher of ethics and as a participant in public affairs. Both his theology and social ethics have deep roots in personal faith, in what he calls 'Biblical faith'..." (91)

Niebuhr's "Biblical faith" enabled him to hold a "Christian Realist" position in regard to man's individual and collective

* Used throughout to refer to the Kegley & Bretall volume.

behaviour. It is given full expression in his Gifford Lectures. He describes the lectures in this way:

> "...the world depression and the rise of the Nazi terror swept away the last remnants of liberal utopianism. Having been invited to give the Gifford Lectures in Edinburgh on the very eve of the Second World War, I inevitably sought to give a theological frame to the now pervasive realism. .... The Nature and Destiny of Man, sought to describe the biblical-hebraic description of the human situation, particularly in the symbols of 'the image of God in man' and man as 'sinner'."(92)

Later Niebuhr incorporated studies undertaken for the Lyman Beecher Lectures at Yale, the Warrack Lectures at the Scottish Universities, and a lectureship at the University of Uppsala, in a book called Faith and History, published in 1949. These studies elaborated the second part of his Gifford Lectures. The Nature and Destiny of Man and Faith and History are the two major works of Niebuhr's mature years, and reflect his theological frame of reference for his social ethics during those years.

In this chapter we are concerned to describe the formative context in which Niebuhr's thought developed in relation to his work in Christian social ethics. Subsequent chapters will analyse his theological method, and give a critical evaluation of it.

Niebuhr's own reflections on the formative influences by which he came to what we have called his mature position are recorded in "Intellectual Autobiography", parts of which we quote:

> "I am.... surprised to note in retrospect how late I was in studying the thought of Augustine carefully .... because the thought of this theologian was to answer so many of my unanswered questions and to emancipate me finally from the notion that the Christian faith was in some way identical with the moral idealism of the past century.
>
> .... It is difficult to know whether the criticism of both liberal and Marxist views of human nature and history was prompted by a profounder understanding of the Biblical faith; or whether this understanding was prompted by the refutation of the liberal and Marxist faith by the tragic facts of contemporary history which included two world wars and the encounter of a liberal culture with two idolatrous tyrannies, first Nazism and then Communism, resting respectively upon the foundations of moral cynicism and moral utopianism.
>
> In these works (The Nature and Destiny of Man and Faith and History) I was concerned to prove that

> modern versions of man's nature and fate were at once very different from, and yet very similar to, the interpretations found in classical idealism, and that the Biblical view of man was superior to both classical and modern views. The intellectual pilgrimage which these succeeding volumes reveal shows that I began to criticize liberal viewpoints from a Marxist perspective in the first instance, and that I learned gradually to subject both viewpoints to a Christian criticism. I learned increasingly to value highly, rather than be apologetic for, the unique emphasis of Biblical faith..." (93)

(a) The Influence of St Augustine

The extent of the influence of Augustine may be deduced from the many references to his works in the writings that came out of Niebuhr's mature years. While he is not uncritical of Augustine, he has acknowledged that he "awakened" from his "socialist slumber" partly as the result of his study of Augustine's works.(94)

A considerable amount of Augustine's writing is polemical because of his concern to defend the Faith against the doctrines of Manichaeanism and his involvement in the Donatist and Pelagian controversies which were of contemporary importance to the Church.

Augustine's treatise on the nature and meaning of history, stimulated by Alaric's sacking of Rome, is contained in The City Of God: a book which Niebuhr called "one of the most important books of our spiritual history." This tribute appears in an article Niebuhr wrote in 1942, entitled "Faith for History's Greatest Crisis", in which he describes the importance of The City Of God.

> "In it Augustine affirmed that the Christian religion contained an interpretation of life and history that made it possible to anticipate and to discount the periodic catastrophes of history. Every empire, every 'city of this world', he declared, would have to break down ultimately because its 'peace was based on strife'. Which is to say that such social peace as is achieved in any civilization rests upon a precarious equilibrium of social forces. This equilibrium may degenerate into anarchy if there is no strong organizing center in it. And it may degenerate into tyranny if the organizing center destroys the vitality of the parts." (95)

In Niebuhr's view Augustine was "the first great 'realist' in western history". His picture of social reality "gives an adequate

account of the social factions, tensions, and competitions which we know to be well-nigh universal on every level of community; while the classical age conceived the order and justice of its polis to be a comparatively simple achievement," when "reason had brought all subrational forces under its dominion."(96)

Whilst Augustine was influenced by classical philosophy, his viewpoint is closer to the Biblical view of man's nature and destiny, according to Niebuhr. Augustine's view of man is a case in point. The self according to Augustine is an integral unity of mind and body, yet it is something more than mind and has the ability to transcend its functions of mind, memory, and will. "These three things, memory, understanding and love are mine and not their own", wrote Augustine, "for they do what they do not for themselves but for me; or rather I do it by them. For it is I who remember by memory and understand by understanding and love by love." (De Trinitate, 15.22)

A corollory of Augustine's view of man is his understanding of moral evil. Niebuhr's thought reveals the influence of Augustine at this point in particular. Following Coplestone's commentary on Augustine, the cause of moral evil "is not in the Creator but the created will. . . . Evil,then is 'that which falls away from the essence and tends to non-being. . . It tends to make that which is cease to be.'"(97)

The source of evil is not some residual natural impulse which the mind has not yet mastered. It is the excessive love of self, sometimes defined by Augustine as pride or superbia, which causes man to abandon God as his true end and makes of himself an end - that is the source of evil. This understanding of moral evil enabled Augustine to refute classical theories of evil by asserting that "it is not the bad body which causes the good soul to sin but the bad soul which causes the good body to sin." (De Civ.Dei 15.5) A major part of Niebuhr's Gifford Lectures is devoted to an analysis and critique of contemporary history by means of the concept of superbia.

Niebuhr believed that the "absurdity" of the Christian doctrine of sin, whereby man sins "inevitably" but is nevertheless responsible for his sin, is made explicit in Augustine. In justification of this view Niebuhr quotes Augustine:

> "Man's nature was indeed at first created faultless and without sin; but nature as man now has it, into which every one is born from Adam, wants the Physician, being no longer in a healthy state. All good qualities which it still possesses... it has from the most High God, its Creator and Maker. But the flaw which darkens and weakens all these natural goods it has not contracted from its blameless Creator... but from that original sin which it committed of its own free will." (98)

This "absurd" doctrine is essential if our estimate of Man's nature is to be realistic. Sin is natural for man, according to Niebuhr, in the sense that it is universal but not in the sense it is necessary... the whole crux of the doctrine of original sin lies in the seeming absurdity of the conception of freewill which underlies it. The Pauline doctrine, as elaborated by Augustine and the Reformers, insists on the one hand that the will of man is enslaved to sin and is incapable of fulfilling God's law... Yet on the other hand....Augustine insists upon the reality of free-will whenever he has cause to fear that the concept of original sin might threaten the idea of human responsibility: 'Only let no man dare to deny the freedom of the will as to desire to excuse sin'." (99)

In Niebuhr's view it is Augustine's understanding of sin, and the manner in which he elaborates it with reference to man's collective life, that makes him the first great realist of Western history.

In The City of God Augustine describes the social effect of human self-love. Following Coplestone, he "sees the history of the human race as the history of the dialectic of... two principles, (love of God) the one forming the City of Jerusalem, the other (self-love) the city of Babylon."(100) While the civitas terrena is inter-related with the civitas dei, it is dominated by self-love to the point of contempt for God. The civitas dei is actuated by love of God to the point of contempt for self, and is thereby distinguished from the civitas terrena.

For Augustine, the word 'city' does not denote the city-state of classical thought, as for example in Plato. It signifies man in community on the levels of the family, the commonwealth, and the world. The love of the city of God is the leaven for the city of this world: amor dei is the final norm by which all our actions must be judged. Every "earthly peace", says Augustine, is good

as far as it goes. "But they will not have it long for they used it not well while they had it." That is to say, unless some larger love qualifies the self-interest of groups, collective self-interest can lead either to conflict between competing groups, or injustice by a dominant group which "when it is victorious... will become vice's slave."(101)

Niebuhr's indebtedness to Augustine is clear, but it is also clear that he did not follow him unquestioningly. He criticizes Augustine's thought on several important issues. Niebuhr argues, for example, that Augustine's distinction between the "two loves" which characterize the "two cities" which "commingle" in this world is over simple. Augustine does not recognize that this commingling is not due to the fact that there are two different kinds of people in the world. It is because the conflict between love and self-love exists in every person. In the political sphere, says Niebuhr, it is important to note that personal dedication is no guarantee against a person's involvement in the collective egotism which so often characterizes groups. Niebuhr's other main criticism of Augustine relates to his understanding of <u>amor dei</u>. He argues that here Augustine is influenced by classical rather than biblical thought. The <u>agape</u> of the New Testament is not fully appreciated by him, for two reasons. The New Testament emphasizes an equality of love of God and neighbour-love, whereas Augustine makes neighbour-love subservient to love of God. The other facet of <u>agape</u> which, according to Niebuhr, is obscured in Augustine's <u>amor dei</u> is the element of sacrificial love. This Niebuhr calls "the absurd principle of the Cross, the insistence that the self must sacrifice itself for the other."(102)

In spite of the defects which he detects in Augustine's thought, Niebuhr believed that his "political realism" is vastly superior to religious and secular thinkers who have preceded or come after him. The extent of Niebuhr's appreciation is illustrated in the following passage:

> "A part of (his) superiority was due to his reliance upon biblical rather than idealistic or naturalistic conceptions of selfhood. But that could not have been the only cause, else Christian systems before and after him would not have been so inferior. Or were they inferior because they subordinated the biblical-dramatic conception of human selfhood too much to the rationalistic scheme, as was the case with medieval Christianity culminating in the thought

> of Thomas Aquinas? or because they did not understand that the corruption of human freedom could not destroy the original dignity of man, as was the case with the Reformation with its doctrines of sin, bordering on total depravity and resulting in Luther's too pessimistic approach to political problems?
>
> As for secular thought, it has difficulty in approaching Augustine's realism without falling into cynicism or in avoiding nihilism without falling into sentimentality. Hobbes' realism was based on an insight which he shared with Augustine, namely, that in all historical encounters the mind is the servant and not the master of the self. But he failed to recognize that the self which thus made the mind its instrument was a corrupted and not a 'normal' self. Modern 'realists' know the power of collective self-interest as Augustine did; but they do not understand its blindness. Modern pragmatists understood the irrelevance of fixed and detailed norms; but they do not understand that love must take the place as the final norm for these inadequate norms. Modern liberal Christians know that love is the final norm for man; but they fall into sentimentality because they fail to measure the power and persistence of self-love. Thus Augustine, whatever may be the defects of his approach to political reality... nevertheless proves himself a more reliable guide than any known thinker." (103)

We include this quotation from Niebuhr because it demonstrates more than just the extent of his indebtedness to Augustine. It also indicates the manner in which he built on those foundations a critique of classical and modern thought that was uniquely his own. This he did at a time of crisis in Western history which he believed was at least equal to that which prompted Augustine's work.

(b) The Influence of Pascal and Kierkegaard

Writing on "The Historical Roots of Niebuhr's Thought", Richard Kroner says: "Niebuhr belongs to the illustrious group of those writers who called attention to the alarming illusions of bourgeois society regarding the moral progress of mankind and its potential capacities in overcoming 'original sin'".(104) In pursuit of that end Kroner believes that Niebuhr stood in the tradition of writers like Dostoevsky, Ibsen, Zola, Strindberg, and Unamuno.

Among the theological thinkers who influenced Niebuhr are the

Christian existentialists Pascal and Kierkegaard. If Niebuhr attributed his awakening from a "socialist slumber" to his reading of Augustine, he has also acknowledged the part played by Pascal in that awakening.(105) Speaking of the influence of Kierkegaard, Kroner goes so far as to say that "Niebuhr can be called a Christian existentialist on better grounds than Jaspers or Marcel, for Jaspers explicitly rejects... religious revelation as a source of truth, while Marcel, though a devout Catholic, makes little use of Scripture in his philosophy. Quite independently of continental 'crisis-theology' Niebuhr developed his own scheme of an existentialist interpretation of Biblical revelation."(106)

There can be no doubt of Niebuhr's indebtedness to Pascal and Kierkegaard, as well as to Martin Buber the Jewish philosopher. However, the conclusion which Kroner draws from this is not entirely accurate. Without becoming involved in a semantic argument about the term 'existential', we believe that Niebuhr used existential modes of thought, particularly from the works of Pascal and Kierkegaard, without adopting a "scheme" of "existentialist interpretation of Biblical revelation."

We believe Niebuhr would agree with David Roberts' opinion that "existentialism cannot serve as a self-sufficient philosophy. Its chief value is that of a corrective."(107) Niebuhr displays in his writings many of the characteristic features of existentialist thinking which Roberts identifies in his Existentialism and Religious Belief. These are, inter alia, a protest against all forms of rationalism which assume that reality can be grasped primarily by intellectual means; a protest against all forms of thinking which regard man as a 'thing' - an assortment of functions and reactions; its clearcut distinction between subjective and objective truth that stresses the distinction between knowing about the truth and being grasped by the truth in a personal manner. Existentialism, in all its varieties, says Roberts, "regards man as fundamentally ambiguous. This is very closely linked to its predominant stress on freedom."(108) Existentialism views the human situation as filled with contradictions and ambiguities which cannot be resolved by such scientific information as may close the gaps in our knowledge of man, or for that matter, by further philosophical analysis. Ambiguity and contradiction belong to the very nature of the human situation. Man is free; yet he is conscious

of responsibility, of anxiety, of guilt. His freedom exists within a natural and social order which to a greater or lesser degree determines what he is. Man is finite; yet he has the capacity of self-transcendence. He is bound by time; yet he can rise above the present and see its relation to the past and to the future.

For Niebuhr the contribution made by Pascal and Kierkegaard to our understanding of human selfhood is of lasting importance. In seeking to prove his thesis that the Biblical view of man is superior to both classical and modern views, Niebuhr finds support for his position in the work of these Christian existentialists.

Speaking of the significance of Blaise Pascal's contribution, Niebuhr writes: "The whole realm of genuine selfhood, of sin and grace, is beyond the comprehension of various systems of philosophy. Neither Aristotle nor Kant succeeds in accounting for the concrete human self as free agent. This mystery of human freedom, including the concomitant mystery of historic evil, plus the previous incongruity of man both as free spirit and as a creature of nature, led Pascal to elaborate his Christian existialism in opposition to the Cartesian rationalism and Jesuit Thomism of his day. Pascal delved 'in mysteries without which man remains a mystery to himself'."(109)

One of the mysteries into which Pascal delved is what Niebuhr calls "the logical absurdity of the doctrine of original sin". This doctrine which Niebuhr believed to be essential to a realist interpretation of man's nature, is frankly accepted by Pascal in words which reveal a characteristic of existentialist thinkers: the holding in tension of the paradox of man's 'greatness' and his 'wretchedness' Niebuhr uses the following quotation from Pascal in support of his own views on original sin and man's responsibility: (110)

> "In fact if man had never been corrupt, he would enjoy in his innocence both truth and happiness... and if man had always been corrupt he would have no idea of truth and bliss. But wretched as we are, and more so if there were no greatness in our condition, we have an idea of happiness and cannot reach it... For it is beyond doubt that there is nothing which more shocks our reason than to say that the sin of the first man has rendered guilty those who, being so removed from its source, seem incapable of participating in it... Certainly nothing offends us more rudely than this doctrine, and yet without this mystery, the most incomprehensible of all, we are incomprehensible to ourselves. (Pensees, 434)"

Pascal's emphasis on the paradox of man's grandeur and misery is essential for an authentic understanding of man, in Niebuhr's view. He writes: "The Christian conception of the dignity of man and of the misery of man is all of one piece, as Pascal rightly apprehended. All Renaisance and modern emphasis upon the dignity of man to the exclusion of the Christian conception of the sin of man are lame efforts to reconstruct the Christian doctrine of self-hood without understanding the full implications of the Christian conception of the self's freedom."(111)

Niebuhr finds corroboration for his exposition of man's creatureliness in the work of Sören Kierkegaard. Writing in the Gifford Lectures, Niebuhr states that Kierkegaard's understanding of "self-consciousness" expresses better than most theologians the paradox of man's finitude and his capacity to transcend finiteness. The following passage indicates the measure of Niebuhr's indebtedness:

> "... it is important to recognize that Christianity in its authentic and Biblical form is not subject to the charge of 'idealism' so frequently levelled at it by materialists and naturalists. It knows of the finiteness of the self and of its involvement in all the relativities and contingencies of nature and history. The presuppositions of its faith make it possible to realize that the self in the highest reaches of its self-consciousness is still the mortal and finite self. In this, as in other instances, Kierkegaard has interpreted the true meaning of human selfhood more accurately than any modern, and possibly than any previous, Christian theologian. He writes: 'The determining factor in the self is consciousness, i.e. self-consciousness... The self is the conscious synthesis of the limited and the unlimited... Therefore development consists of this; that in the eternalization of the self one escapes the self endlessly and in the temporalization of the self one endlessly returns to the self'." (112)

In Niebuhr's view the perennial question for Christian apologetics is whether, and in what manner, the biblical-Christian view of man's nature and destiny can be related to the understanding of man which emerges in the secular disciplines. In an essay "Coherence, Incoherence, and Christian Faith", in which he comes closest to an exposition of his own theological methodology, Niebuhr discerns two traditions within the Christian faith regarding the perennial question for apologetics. From our description of the formative context of Niebuhr's thought it is clear that he stands in the

first of these traditions.

> "On the one hand, there is a tradition of Christian theology which glories in the contradiction between the foolishness of God and the wisdom of men. It runs from Tertullian, through Augustine, Occam, Duns Scotus, to the Reformation, Pascal, Kierkegaard, and Barth.
>
> Luther speaks for this tradition in the words: 'We know that reason is the devil's harlot and can do nothing but slander all that God says and does. If outside of Christ you wish by your own thoughts to know your relation to God you will break your neck. - Therefore keep to revelation and do not try to understand.'
>
> The other tradition runs from Origen through Aquinas, the Christian Platonists, the Renaisance Humanists, to modern liberal Christianity. For this tradition Aquinas speaks: 'The natural dictates of reason must certainly be true. It is impossible to think of their being otherwise, nor again is it possible to believe that the tenets of faith are false. Since falsehood alone is contrary to truth it is impossible for the truths of faith to be contrary to the principles known by reason.'
>
> The inconclusive character of the debate... may be due to the tendency of one side to make the supra-rational affirmations of faith too simply irrational ... Christian rationalists, on the other hand, equate meaning too simply with rationality and thereby inevitably obscure some of the profoundest incongruities, tragic antinomies, and depth of meaning on the edge of the mysteries in human life and history..." (113)

The concepts and intellectual tools which Niebuhr used in his own analysis of man's nature and destiny, reveal that he stands - albeit critically - in the tradition which runs through Augustine, the Reformers, Pascal, Kierkegaard, and Barth. He uses the concepts "tragedy" and "irony" to interpret history. He is not afraid of paradox except when it offers an easy retreat into irrationality. His dialectical method is more closely akin to that of Kierkegaard than that of Hegel. Whereas Hegel's dialectical method was used in order to conceive the Absolute, Kierkegaard's was used to show that the Absolute cannot ultimately be conceived by human reason. As we have seen, Niebuhr does not shy away in alarm at the "absurd" in the Christian's understanding of original sin. He uses it symbolically to describe human evil as an inevitable condition of man's finite nature. He believed, with Kierkegaard, that a 'leap of faith' is necessary for a man who, in contrition, is reconciled

to God in Christ.

Two major criticisms of the existentialism made it impossible for Niebuhr to accept existentialism as a self-sufficient philosophy, and negatively defined the areas in which he wished to work. Niebuhr argued that "Kierkegaard's protest against Hegelianism betrays him into a position in which all enquiries into essences, universal forms, are discounted in order to emphasize the existing particular." Kierkegaard can therefore have no sense of history, since the existing individual is the only particular in history and can only have an internal history. Furthermore, Niebuhr argues, Kierkegaard ... exploits the inner contradiction within man as free spirit and contingent object too simply as the basis of faith... (so that) by embracing this contradiction in passionate subjectivity,... (man) comes truly to himself." This leads Kierkegaard to the position in which passionate subjectivity becomes the only test of truth "in such a way that a disinterested worship of an idol is preferred to the wrong worship of the true God... but it also lacks any standard by which the true God could be disinguished from a false God. In other words, a passionate Nazi could meet Kierkegaard's test... (surely a) hazardous subjectivity."(114)

Since he wanted to take history more seriously than he believed Kierkegaard did, Niebuhr could not base his work on his existentialism. On the other hand, Niebuhr believed that both Pascal and Kierkegaard had made important contributions to the Christian understanding of man. In his search for adequate criteria for social choice Niebuhr therefore drew heavily on their contributions.

(c) Fight With Barth

Throughout Niebuhr's life polemic was part of his staple diet. One of the liveliest chapters in Niebuhr's polemical life was his debate with Karl Barth. It began in the late twenties, proceeded face to face at the meeting of the World Council of Churches in Amsterdam in 1948, and was brought to an end in the early sixties. It is a poignant debate because, in spite of the deep cleavages in their viewpoints, Niebuhr has publicly acknowledged his indebtedness to Barth. It is poignant because, according to Oscar Cullman, Barth "considered Niebuhr a worthy opponent".(115)

The debate is important because both Barth and Niebuhr reacted

strongly against nineteenth century liberal Protestant theology which, according to Barth, reached its peak and denouement with the publication of Harnack's What is Christianity? in 1900.(116) In spite of the fact that they were contemporaries, not only in years, but in the turbulent and torturous paths by which they came to their 'mature' positions, Barth and Niebuhr differed greatly in their responses to contemporary events, and in their theological methods.

Barth has acknowledged his debt to Kierkegaard. He stands, in this sense, in the tradition with which Niebuhr identified himself, and which he described as including Paul, Augustine, the Reformers, Pascal and Kierkegaard. In the words of H.R.Mackintosch:

> "In Kierkegaard, it is widely recognized, we have in some degree a precursor of Karl Barth. Barth's words are often quoted: 'If I have a system, it consists in this, that always as far as possible I keep in mind what Kierkegaard spoke of as the infinite qualitative difference between time and eternity, alike in its negative and positive meaning. God is in heaven, you are on earth',"(117)

In spite of his indebtedness to Kierkegaard, Barth came seriously to question and finally to discard existentialism as a philosophical basis for his work. Writing of the second edition of his Dogmatic, Barth says: "To the best of my ability I have cut out of this second issue of the book everything that in the first issue might give the slightest appearance of giving theology a basis, support, or even a mere justification in the way of existential philosophy."(118) In this view he has something in common with Niebuhr, although Niebuhr does not discard existential modes of thought where these assist him in his work.

In our examination of Niebuhr's theological method, we will have occasion to refer to differences between Barth and Niebuhr. It is necessary here to indicate in a general way, therefore, the context in which these differences arose.

Perhaps the major difference between Barth and Niebuhr lies in their respective understandings of the theological task. For Barth it is primarily a dogmatic one, whereas Niebuhr is primarily an ethicist and apologist. In consequence their approaches vary considerably. It is also clear that the contexts in which they worked were divergent. Whereas so-called "crisis-theology" in

Europe sought to disengage Christian theology from its identification with an apparently collapsing culture, the crisis in America was of a different kind, and prompted Niebuhr to disengage theology from its identification with the "soft utopianism" of a liberal culture.

The disparity between Niebuhr and Barth may emerge more clearly when viewed in the light of the manner in which Barth sought to verify the truth of God's revelation. Jürgen Moltmann has argued that Barth's theology must be seen as an attempt to establish "the proof of God from 'God'".(119) He writes:

> "If I see the situation correctly, a quite independent onto-theological thought has developed in Karl Barth... God's word is not founded in any other thing. In his word and his revelation, God is the sovereign subject and, for this reason, he enters into no correlation and into no circle of human consciousness. Therefore, he is not a point of relation to be inquired for in advance from an a priori of world and existence, which is already known in the form of the question. The sovereignty of God which is inaccessible to the world and existence validates itself in the act of revelation..." (120)

If this assessment of Barth is correct the difference between his method and Niebuhr's becomes evident. Niebuhr is Barthian in the emphasis he places on revelation in his theology. But he also insists on maintaining a commerce with the secular disciplines - what we understand by Moltmann's "correlation" of "world and existence".

In the course of this essay we will examine how Niebuhr validates the truth of Christian faith by showing its adequacy to illumine man's nature and destiny. We will also examine how he allows experience to modify his theology. There is, therefore, an important sense in which Niebuhr cannot be called Barthian.

In 1928, when Niebuhr was still partly in the liberal 'camp', he reviewed the first of Barth's books to be translated into English and published in America. His review of Das Wort Gottes und die Theologie commends Barth, inter alia, for re-introducing "the note of tragedy in religion" as a "wholesome antidote to the superficial optimism of most current theology."(121) The review, entitled "Barth - Apostle of the Absolute", asks, however, whether the "moral price" Barth pays for the "religious advantages of his theology"

is not too high.(122)

In reacting to the subjectivism and relativism of liberal theology, Barth's dogmatics "is a new kind of fundamentalism or an old kind of orthodoxy," writes Niebuhr. It is "a revival of the theology of the Reformation, Calvinistic in its conception of God and Lutheran in its emphasis upon the experience of justification by faith."(123) It should be noted that during his formative years at Union, Niebuhr himself came to a deeper appreciation of Reformation theology. However, Niebuhr critisizes Barth:

> "In order to escape the relativism of a theology which is based upon and corrected by biology, psychology, social science, philosophy, and every other field of knowledge, we accept a theology which has no way of authenticating itself except by the fact that it meets human need. This is a sorry victory. Relativism may be defeated but at the price of a new and more terrifying subjectivism. How do we know that the human need which this kind of religion satisfies is not really a too-morbid conscience?" (124)

These are strong words, but they highlight one major area of conflict between Barth and Niebuhr. On the one hand Barth believed the task of theology is a dogmatic one, declaring that God is known in the history of His deeds and self-disclosure, and disavowing any commerce between faith and culture. On the other hand, Niebuhr believed that the revelation of God in Christ can and must be authenticated in the commerce between faith and culture. He writes:

> "We can escape relativity and uncertainty only by piling experience upon experience, checking hypothesis against hypothesis, correcting errors by considering new perspectives, and finally by letting the experience of the race qualify the individual's experience of God." (125)

When Barth and Niebuhr met face to face at the World Council of Churches meeting in 1948, another major area of difference became clear. Barth's address to the Amsterdam Assembly was entitled "No Christian Marshall Plan" in which he insisted that the Church has no system of economic and political principles to offer to the world. Niebuhr's reply to Barth's address was printed in the Christian Century under the title "We Are Men And Not God", in October 1948. In this article Niebuhr criticized Barth's "realized eschatology":

> "The assurance, declared Barth, that 'Jesus Christ has already robbed sin, death, the devil and hell of their power and has already vindicated divine and human justice in his person' ought to persuade us 'even on the first day of our deliberations that the care of the church and the care of the world is not our care. Burdened by this thought we could straighten nothing out.' For the final root of human disorder is precisely 'this dreadful, godless, ridiculous opinion that man is the Atlas who is destined to bear the dome of heaven upon his shoulders.'" (126)

No Christian, argued Niebuhr, can quarrel with the affirmation that the Church finds its authentic existence in the revelatory and redemptive power of the Christ-event. The questions which arose in Amsterdam were about the conclusions drawn from this article of faith. "We are warned... that the 'care of the world is not our care'. We are to beware lest we seem to present a kind of 'Christian Marshall Plan' to the nations. This is a wholesome warning against the pet schemes of Christian moralists. But does it not annul the church's prophetic function to the nations?", asks Niebuhr.(127) Can the Barthian emphasis offer any help to the Christian in the day-to-day decisions that are part and parcel of his existence? Elsewhere, Niebuhr argues that Barth's theology offers little help in the field of Christian ethics:

> "Ethically Barth is as relativist as Westermarck and epistomologically as much a positivist as Carnap... In this world Barth bids the Christian Church to witness to the resurrection; that is, to set up signs and symbols of redemption in the confusion of sin... He bids the Church to wait until the issues are clear before it bears... heroic witness, just as he himself waited in witnessing against Hitlerism until the manifest injustices of a tyrannical state revealed their clearly idolatrous religious character. This is a religion, as a Catholic critic rightly observes, which is fashioned for the catacombs and has little relation to the task of transfiguring the natural stuff of politics by the grace and wisdom of the Gospel." (128)

It is Barth's ethical relativism which caused Niebuhr to break finally any ties he might have had with him. Writing in 1949, Niebuhr says:

> "Barth seems inclined today to regard the differences between Communism and the so-called democratic world as insignificant when viewed from the ultimate Christian standpoint. But we

> are men and not God, and the destiny of civilizations depends upon our decisions in the 'nicely calculated less and more' of good and evil in political institutions." (129)

Following the putting down of the Hungarian uprising in October, 1956, a bitter exchange ensued between Niebuhr and some of Barth's Students. Niebuhr wrote an article called "Why is Barth Silent on Hungary?"in which he criticizes Barth's complacency, and suggests that the reasons for his silence lie in a "defective" theological approach:

> "Karl Barth's theological framework is defective for wise political decisions for two reasons. The first is that he is too consistently 'eschatological'... In his essay 'The Christian Community and Political Change' he declares: 'the goal toward which we are moving is the second coming of our Lord Jesus Christ. The message of the church is a message of hope for everyone. Alternations in political systems must stand in the light of this great change, which is called Jesus Christ. It would be curious if the Church, which knows of this one great change, could not accept with a certain calm certain smaller changes.'
>
> ... Not being a theologian, I can only observe that if one reaches a very high altitude, in either an eschatological or a real airplane, all distinctions which seem momentous on the 'earthly' level are dwarfed into insignificance...
>
> The second defect in Barth's theological approach to political and moral problems is his extreme pragmatism, which disavows all moral principles... (130)

Barth did not respond to Niebuhr's article, but some of his students did. Niebuhr's part of the exchange is contained in Essays In Applied Christianity.(131) This chapter in Niebuhr's polemical life was nearing an end, however. In 1960 Niebuhr concluded his exchanges with Barth when he wrote:

> "... Barth has long since ceased to have any effect on my thought... What seventeenth century Lutheran orthodoxy did to Luther in a century, Barth has managed to do to his own thought in a few decades...(132)

Summary.

In this chapter we have traced what Niebuhr calls his"torturous" pilgrimage from a "simple Christian 'Liberal' moralism" to the "Christian realism" of his mature years. In doing so we have described some of the important factors which had a formative influence on him. We must now proceed to a detailed examination of Niebuhr's theological method.

Chapter Three

CHRISTIAN REALISM

In order to set the scene for our subsequent study of Niebuhr's theological method, this chapter offers a brief exposition and critique of Christian Realism.

Some roots of Niebuhr's realism considered: the philosophical basis for ethics; and the roots of Niebuhr's political realism. The relation between Christian Realism and neo-orthodoxy.

An exposition and critique of Niebuhr's most methodologically explicit essay: "Coherence, Incoherence, and Christian Faith." The question of validation. Niebuhr's 'uneasy dualism' considered.

CHAPTER THREE

CHRISTIAN REALISM: AN EXPOSITION AND CRITIQUE

Niebuhr does not often name his theological method. Neither does he give much help to the student of his thought by offering a systematic exposition of his theological methodology. However, Niebuhr has described his position as "Biblical", or "Christian" "Realism". And he has written an essay in which he sets out in broad terms the main features of his Christian realist position. In order to set the scene, as it were, for our analysis of his theological method we have chosen to concentrate in this chapter on the exposition of Christian Realism contained in the essay "Coherence, Incoherence, and Christian Faith"[1] published in his book Christian Realism and Political Problems (1953). This essay is described by John Bennett, Niebuhr's colleague at Union, as introducing one "in a more technical way to his theological methodology".[2] For the reason suggested by Bennett's evaluation it warrants careful study.

In our exposition and critique we will seek to place Christian Realism in its historical context, and indicate some of the philosophical and ethical considerations which gave rise to it. As we will show, his Christian Realism as expounded in that essay, is the culmination of years of grappling with theological and moral problems. We will offer some criticisms of "Coherence, Incoherence, and Christian Faith". These crticisms are also intended to set the scene for the analysis of his theological method which will occupy us in subsequent chapters of this study.

(1) SOME ROOTS OF NIEBUHR'S REALISM

The most important factors to influence Niebuhr during his formative years may also be said to prescribe his abiding concern to clarify and elaborate a realist position. These factors were, in his own words: "his boredom with epistemology", his "disillusionment in nineteenth century religion", and his experience in Detroit which "determined (his) development more than any books (he) may

have read." We have already described his Detroit years, and will have occasion to refer to them frequently during the course of this study. We should note, however, that his exposition of Christian Realism contained in the essay "Coherence, Incoherence, and Christian Faith" must be understood against the background of his Detroit experience.

Liberal theology as it was taught at Yale made a profound impression on Niebuhr. He was concerned, therefore, that his Yale training would not be well received in an Evangelical parish. However, it was not his congregation as such that caused Niebuhr to react against the "simple Christian 'liberal' moralism" which characterized American Liberal Protestantism. As we saw in Chapter Two, it was the events in Detroit, symbolized in his fight with Ford, which caused him to become disillusioned in "nineteenth century religion". Subsequent events in American and European history, plus his exposure at Union to biblical and classical theology, served to heighten that disillusionment, and to provide the impetus for his search for a more adequate alternative.

Niebuhr's brother has epitomized Liberal Protestantism in America, as it appeared to those who, whilst influenced by it, came to react against it because it seemed unable to provide any adequate answers to the agonizing questions which contemporary events raised in such dramatic fashion. H. Richard Niebuhr's epitomization is, we believe, a concise statement of the inadequacies of "nineteenth century religion" which launched Reinhold on his torturous path towards Christian Realism.

> "The romantic conception of the kingdom of God involved no discontinuities, no crises, no tragedies, or sacrifices, no loss of all things, no cross, and resurrection. In ethics it reconciled the interests of the individual with those of society by means of a faith in a natural identity of interests or in the benevolent, altruistic character of man. In politics and economics it slurred over national and class divisions, seeing only the growth of unity and ignoring the increase of self-assertion and exploitation. In religion it reconciled God and man by deifying the latter and humanizing the former... Christ the Redeemer became Jesus the teacher or spiritual genius in whom the religious capacities of mankind were fully developed... Evolution, growth, development, the culture of the religious life, the nurture of kindly sentiments, the extension of humanitarian ideals, and the progress of civilization took the place of the Christian revolution...

> A God without wrath brought men without sin into a kingdom without judgement through the ministrations of a Christ without a cross."(3)

Whereas Niebuhr's one-time "boredom with epistemology" prompted him to forego an academic career for a pastoral one, there is evidence that he was never able to escape epistemological problems. He acknowledges, for example, that if philosophical theories once bored him, he came to recognize their importance if the "age-old alliance between the Christian faith and philosophical idealism" was to be challenged. This acknowledgement is important because it highlights the fact that Niebuhr's interest in epistemology was prompted by apologetic and ethical concerns. It also highlights the tension between idealism and realism which constitutes a basic feature of his thought.(4)

Robert Fitch documented the many "polarities" in Niebuhr's writings - idealism/realism is one - and found over one hundred in his books. By means of these "polarities" Niebuhr explores the complex character of man's nature and his history. As such they "overlap and intersect one another in the most complicated manner. This can be seen", says Fitch, "by taking one of Niebuhr's basic categories - idealism, perfectionism, utopianism - and examining the antitheses, alternatives, and implications. Thus we get: idealism - realism; idealism - nausea; hypocritical idealism - irresponsible idealism; ..."(5) While Fitch describes idealism as a "basic category" of Niebuhr's thought, he does not develop it in his exposition of Niebuhr's philosophy of history. Such a development is necessary, however, in order to understand that 'philosophy'.

The idealism/realism polarity was important for Niebuhr. His Christian realist position may be described as his manner of handling the tension between the ideal and the actual. In order to show why this is so we will analyze briefly the chapters of the two books, written some twenty six years apart, which indicate his manner of dealing with this tension. The first appears in his Does Civilization Need Religion? (1927) entitled "A Philosophy for an Ethical Religion". The other is his chapter on "Augustine's Political Realism", contained in Christian Realism and Political Problems (1953). In the first he explores the metaphysical basis for ethical religion. The second reveals his indebtedness to Augustine for helping him challenge the alliance between nineteenth century idealism and Christian faith.

(a) A Philosophical Basis for Ethics

It is more than conjecture to assert that Niebuhr's confessed boredom with epistemology was transformed into a vital interest by the issues which confronted him in Detroit. But his renewed interest in philosophy was prompted by ethical considerations. He writes:

> "The ethical problem of religion may be more important than the metaphysical one ... but it cannot be solved without a reorientation of the present philosophical basis of religious conviction." (6)

Niebuhr's manner of reorientating this philosophical basis is to hold in tension the idealism and realism which he believes are native to Christianity. This he does by suggesting that religions are caught on the horns of a dilemma which the "tentative dualism" of Christianity may resolve:

> "By identifying God and the natural world (religions) either persuade men to resign themselves to the inadequacies of nature, under the illusion that divine sanctity has rendered them immutable, or they blind the eye to the imperfections of nature and thus destroy the moral sensitiveness of religion. The Orient has usually derived a morally enervating pessimism from its pantheism, while the Occident has chosen the other horn of the monistic dilemma and fallen into a sentimental optimism. Both alternatives are as untrue to the facts as they are inadequate to men's moral needs." (7)

For Niebuhr the only fruitful alternative to the above dilemma is a "dualism" which maintains some kind of distinction" between God and the world, between the real and the ideal, and "does not lose the one in the other." (8) Whilst dualistic interpretations exist in the history of much religious thought, Niebuhr finds a way forward in their formulation in Hebrew and Christian thought. Such dualism may be metaphysically 'untidy' but it is the source of ethical strength. This is one of its greatest assets, according to Niebuhr. He justifies this claim in the following manner:

> "Early Hebrew religion was naively dualistic , and that is one reason why it has been so potent in the history of religion. God was indeed conceived of as omnipotent; ... But the idea of omnipotence was elaborated dramatically rather than philosophically ...
>
> In the early Christian church the naive dualism of Jesus was given dramatic and dynamic force through his deification, so that he became, in a sense, the God of the ideal, the symbol of the redemptive force in life which is in conflict with evil ...

> (This is symbolized in) the cross in which the conflict between good and evil is portrayed and the possibility as well as the difficulty of the triumph of the good over evil is dramatized."(9)

What we have described as the idealism/realism polarity in Niebuhr's thought, his first and most metaphysical book describes as "dualism". His philosophical interests in that book are prompted by, and subordinate to, his ethical interests. He recognized that "ethical religion" may need a philosophical basis, but his primary concern was that religion become a source of social renewal in those critical times. His Does Civilization Need Religion? was written to give expression to that concern. He was not interested, therefore, in building a systematic metaphysic as a basis for ethics. For the same reasons he was not greatly concerned that dualism may be rationally 'untidy'. Niebuhr finds confirmation in Whitehead for his manner of handling the tension between the ideal and the real; the consequence of which is a dualism which may be rationally unsatisfactory but true to the facts. Niebuhr quotes Whitehead as saying:

> "Christianity has always been a religion seeking a metaphysic in contrast to Buddhism which is a metaphysic generating a religion... The defect of a metaphysical system is the very fact that it is a neat little system which thereby oversimplifies its expression of the world... In respect to its treatment of evil, Christianity is therefore less clear in its metaphysical idea but more inclusive of the facts."(10)

Niebuhr finds additional warrant in the thought of William James for the tentative proposals outlined in his Does Civilization Need Religion? "The moral and spiritual values in which religion is interested have a basis in concrete actuality. They are on the one hand not a mere effervescence on the surface of the concrete, and on the other hand they are not the only basis of historical realities. The pluralism of William James, which has been criticized as scientifically inaccurate and metaphysically inconsistent, seems to have both scientific and metaphysical virtues".(11)

The tentative proposals which Niebuhr outlined in 1926 were elaborated in subsequent works. They may be summarized in this sentence from the chapter "A Philosophy for an Ethical Religion": "There is good reason to accept at least a qualified dualism not only because it is morally more potent than traditional monisms, but because it is metaphysically acceptable."(12)

(b) A Basis for Political Realism

If dualism of the sort we have described is metaphysically "acceptable" for an "ethical religion", the tension between the ideal and the real is essential in political theory. In fact Niebuhr distinguishes between idealism and realism in metaphysics and in political theory. He argues that the words 'idealists' and 'realists' denote dispositions rather than doctrines in political theory, and are therefore less exact than when used in metaphysics.(13) Writing in 1953, he defined realism in political and moral theory as that

> "disposition to take all factors in a social and political situation, which offer resistance to established norms, into account, particularly the factors of self-interest and power. In the words of a notorious 'realist', Machiavelli, the purpose of the realist is 'to follow the truth of the matter rather than the imagination of it; for many have pictures of republics and principalities which have never been seen'. This definition of realism implies that idealists are subject to illusions about social realities, which indeed they are. 'Idealism' is, in the esteem of its proponents, characterized by loyalty to moral norms and ideals, rather than to self-interest, whether individual or collective."(14)

We have already indicated Niebuhr's debt to Augustine, and we will have cause to do so again in subsequent chapters. At this point it is sufficient to note that the reason why Niebuhr cannot accept the realism of the sort elaborated by Machiavelli is that it fails to hold the tension between the ideal and the actual. Augustine is for Niebuhr the "first great 'realist' in western history" precisely because he succeeds in holding this necessary tension. Augustine is a realist because his description of the civitas terrena includes the factors of self-interest and power, and gives them a theological basis in his notion of 'original sin'. Moreover, Augustine's realism does not obscure the tension between the ideal and the real, as his notion of the relation between civitas terrena and civitas dei signifies.

In Augustine Niebuhr fou d a theologian who enabled him to give expression to the realism latent in his earlier writings, and enabled him to elaborate the position which he described as his own: namely, Christian Realism. Niebuhr's indebtedness to Augustine was not unqualified. But he believed him to be superior because

his analysis was closer to the biblical tradition than that of classical philosophers, and because he succeeded better than most to hold in tension the ideal and the real without losing the one in the other.

In the process of formulating his Christian Realism Niebuhr's intellectual roots were imbedded in the biblical tradition, in the metaphysics of Whitehead, in the pragmatism of James, and in the theology of Augustine.

We have indicated some roots of Niebuhr's manner of handling the tension between the ideal and the real. It is in fact a recurring problem in each phase of his thought. This is indicated in the latest assessment of Niebuhr to come to hand; from a former student, Ronald Stone. He writes:

> "A... major thread of continuity is his handling of the relationship of the ideal and the real... He has himself recognized that the central problem of political philosophy is the relationship of man's imaginery communities to the communities in which he lives. The problem appears as a moral and metaphysical issue in his first book... It is seen both in the opposition of communal interest versus personal interests in a 1916 article, and in the major essay of his 1965 book which discusses idealist and realist political theories."(15)

The latest book to come from Niebuhr's pen, Man's Nature and His Communities (1965), is described as the "summary of my life-work". In it he defines Christian realism in terms which may be taken, therefore, as a summary of his own position:

> "In principle, the Christian faith holds that human nature contains both self-regarding and social impulses and that the former are stronger than the latter. This assumption is the basis of Christian realism. It must not be assumed that the virtue inherent in this realistic analysis of the human condition guarantees the validity of any Christian solution for two vexing problems: the establishment of a tolerable harmony between self-regarding individuals within the civil community, and the relations of integral political communities with each other. The second problem is naturally more difficult than the first because of the strength of collective self-regard in comparison with the self-regard of individuals."(16)

(2) CHRISTIAN REALISM AND NEO-ORTHODOXY

Reinhold Niebuhr has rejected the title theologian as descriptive of his work. De Tocqueville's observation about the strong pragmatic emphasis of American theology in comparison with Continental theology is valid in general terms even today; but it is certainly valid as far as Niebuhr's interests are concerned. He was a social ethicist and an apologist.

In spite of his disavowal of the title theologian, Niebuhr's social ethics and apologetics operated within a theological framework which he called Biblical, or Christian realism. This framework, he acknowledged, may justifiably be described as "neo-orthodox". In this sense he has something in common with Paul Tillich, Emil Brunner, Karl Barth, and Rudolf Bultmann. Tillich has in fact affirmed such a commonality, when writing in the Living Library Volume on Brunner:

> "One day several years ago, Emil Brunner was sitting in my apartment in New York and agreed happily and gratefully when I said, 'It seems to me that in spite of the many divergences which exist between you and Barth and Bultmann and Niebuhr and myself, a kind of common ground in theology has developed in our generation.' Any comparison with the preceding period which ended in Europe with the death of Troeltsch and Harnack, and in America with the approach of the Second World War would provide additional confirmation..."(17)

The divergences between Niebuhr and his contemporaries Barth, Brunner, Bultmann, and Tillich are many. In some respects they are so great as to cause him to part company with them on matters of fundamental importance, as for example in Niebuhr's fight with Barth. No doubt these divergences arise because each of these seminal thinkers pursued different interests in response to the issues confronting society. They also arise because of the differences in the European or American contexts in which they worked.

We have already examined the controversy between Barth and Niebuhr, and the points where Niebuhr took issue with Barth. Tillich and Niebuhr were colleagues at Union, and no doubt shared a common concern to communicate the Gospel in the modern world. However, Niebuhr's article in the Living Library Volume on Tillich, entitled "Biblical Thought and Ontological Speculation in Tillich's Theology", indicates the point at which he takes issue with Tillich:

> "Every systematic theology", writes Niebuhr, "engages in more ontological speculation than does Biblical thought. The Bible conceives life as a drama in which human and divine actions create the dramatic whole. There are ontological presuppositions for this drama, but they are not spelled out... The Bible is concerned primarily with God's "mighty acts", that is, with those events in history through which and in which the ultimate power which bears history reveals its mystery. This mystery is revealed in specific historic events rather than in the structures of being... If, in Tillich's language, God must be apprehended in terms both of ultimacy and of concreteness, the Bible assumes ultimacy and speaks of concreteness... If Karl Barth is the Tertullian of our day, abjuring ontological speculations for fear that they may obscure or blunt the kerygma of the Gospel, Tillich is the Origen of our period, seeking to relate the Gospel message to the disciplines of our culture and to the whole history of culture."(18)

Of the neo-orthodox theologians, the thought of Niebuhr and Brunner converge the most; each acknowledging a debt to the other. Niebuhr writes: "I may say that Brunner's whole theological exposition is close to mine and that it is one to which I am more indebted than any other. I say this though in recent years our respective treatment of the ethical problem has diverged rather widely, through his increasing adoption, and my increasing rejection, of the concept of 'Natural Law'."(19)

Although there is little direct reference to Bultmann in Niebuhr's writing, points of divergence emerge whenever the concept 'myth' is under discussion. This is not surprising because this concept is important for both Niebuhr and Bultmann. We shall have occasion later to examine Niebuhr's understanding of myth. Niebuhr is aware that his understanding of myth can be construed as reducing Christianity to another philosophy of religion. He argues, however, that Bultmann did not take sufficient cognisance of the distinction between "pre-scientific" myth and "the myths of permanent validity". Niebuhr, in fact, expressed regret at ever using the word 'myth', especially in the light of the dangers he saw in the "project for 'de-mythologizing' the Bible (which) has been undertaken and bids fair to reduce the Biblical revelation to eternally valid truths without any existential encounters between God and man."(20) This is an obvious reference to Bultmann.

There are many points of divergence between the theologians whom Tillich considered to have much in common, but this is not the place for a detailed comparative analysis of the work of Niebuhr's contemporaries. Neither is it the place to enter into a discussion of the term "neo-orthodox" in relation to their work. But it is instructive for one's understanding of the work of Reinhold Niebuhr to see what he shared with his contemporaries, and what his own particular contribution was. Our analysis of his particular contribution will reveal that in some respects the neo-orthodox label does not fit him well.

Like Niebuhr, the other Protestant theologians who were destined to play a prominent role in the first half of the twentieth century, Barth, Brunner, Bultmann, and Tillich were born before the turn of the century. They began their careers about the time the First World War broke out. They began, in different ways, upon a path of theological reconstruction after that war in a world feeling the impact of the growth of technology and the urban-industrial process which was putting tremendous strains on social and political structures in Europe and America. The path of theological reconstruction upon which they embarked took them away from the thought of Schleiermacher, Ritchl, and Harnack who had dominated the theological scene, especially in Europe.

In breaking with the liberal tradition in which they were trained, they have all to some degree been called "neo-orthodox". Wilhelm Pauck writes of how those who stood within the tradition of liberal theology viewed the process of reconstruction of these neo-orthodox theologians:

> "Harnack, the most representative man of this generation of scholars (of the liberal tradition), professed, with special respect to the thought of Karl Barth... that he would never have thought it possible that during his own life-time a way of thinking would emerge which he would be unable to receive and comprehend for lack of an 'aerial'."(21)

At no time during the long process of theological reconstruction was there unanimity among the so-called neo-orthodox theologians. Yet, as Pauck shows, there are at least five major areas of common concern which have been the pre-occupation of these theologians over the years.(22)

First, they are all concerned to develop a theology of revelation in which knowledge of God is derived from God's self-disclosure of

Himself in Christ. This concern represents a radical departure from the emphasis in Schleiermacher's thought on the sui generis character of religious faith and the formulation of every aspect of doctrine as a particular determination of man's religious consciousness in its Christian form.

Pauck, next, identifies the new understanding of biblical theology or what he calls "a new Biblicism" as a common concern of the neo-orthodox theologians. This "takes the books of the Bible as bearers of a kerygma, a message of salvation that must be believed... It is preoccupied with the concern; how to communicate the gospel." Niebuhr was not uncritical of "Biblicism", but there is no doubt of the role the Bible played in his apologetics.

The third emphasis common to the theologians under discussion Pauck describes as "the importance they attach to historical work." Whilst they found it necessary to depart radically from the tradition of liberal theology, they nevertheless found the emphasis upon historical research in that tradition to be invaluable. Niebuhr's Gifford Lectures in which he makes an historical analysis of the Christian doctrine of man, Barth's From Rousseau to Ritschl, and Bultmann's mastery of the historical method in his New Testament exegesis may be cited as examples of the importance attached to historical research.

Another convergence suggested by Pauck is "the indebtedness of contemporary theology to Reformation research." The renaissance brought about by research into the work of Luther and Calvin has made an impact upon each of Niebuhr's contemporaries. Niebuhr's indebtedness to Luther has been noted in the course of our outline of his development. Once again these men stand, as it were, on the shoulders of those in the tradition of liberal theology whose research into the Reformers has aroused new interest in the work of Luther and Calvin within Protestant theology.

Finally, Pauck draws attention to the ecumenical character of neo-orthodox theology. This fact has already been alluded to in our discussion of Niebuhr's development. All these theologians made major contributions to the crystalization of ecumenical activity from the 1930's onward, albeit with reservations. Brunner voices his reservations about organized ecumenical activity by pointing to the differences between the American and European situations. "Our problem", he writes, "is not the variety of churches in one

country, but rather the comparative irrelevance of the church as such."[23] Niebuhr would share that view, adding that the real task of the Christian church today is to promote "a dialogue between biblical faith and all the disciplines of modern culture in hopes that some day a creative synthesis may be reached."[24]

(3) "COHERENCE, INCOHERENCE, AND CHRISTIAN FAITH": AN EXPOSITION

Niebuhr's book Christian Realism and Political Problems (1953) is a contribution to the "dialogue between biblical faith and all the disciplines of modern culture" which he believed to be the pressing task of our times. It contains a collection of essays written in an attempt "to establish the relevance of Christian faith to contemporary problems, particularly to ethical and political ones."[25] The final essay of the book, "Coherence, Incoherence, and Christian Faith" is, as Bennett suggests, his most theologically methodological one. Its thesis may be expressed in the words of a letter he wrote in 1960, in which he says that the coherencies of philosophy, like the methods of science, can be used as "the preliminary test of truth", but "the final arbiter... is the experience of incongruities in life and history which cannot be digested in logically coherent systems."[26] The relevance of Christian faith is its capacity to illumine what philosophy and science cannot; namely, the experience of "incongruities". In the dialogue between faith and the disciplines of modern culture, Niebuhr hopes that a creative synthesis may emerge. In his essay he makes some proposals concerning the apologetic task in this regard.

Whilst the whole of reality is characterised by a "basic coherence", Niebuhr argues that there are four reasons why coherence cannot be used as a basic test of truth. (a) There are historical characters and events whose uniqueness makes it impossible to fit them into any rational system. There are, too, unique moral situations which cannot be fitted into a system of natural law. (b) "Realms of coherence... may stand in rational contradiction to each other."[27] Thus, says Niebuhr, neither the classical metaphysicists nor Hegel could embrace the emergence of novelty in historical development. (c) There are "configurations and structures

which stands athwart every rationally conceived system of meaning... "[28] The primary example for Niebuhr, is man himself. (d) The mystery of human freedom cannot be conceived in any "natural or rational scheme of coherence... (This) led Pascal to elaborate his Christian existentialism... (in which he) delved 'in mysteries without which man remains a mystery to himself'."[29]

If coherence cannot be a basic test of truth, in what way are the "suprarational" affirmations of the Christian faith related to and validated by their "capacity to resolve and clarify the antinomies, the aspects of uniqueness and particularity, the obscure meanings and tangents of meaning in human life and history",[30] asks Niebuhr.

In answering this question, Niebuhr divides the world religions into two categories: the historical religions are Christianity, Judaism, and "possibly" Zoroastrianism and Mohammedanism. Culture religions is the term Niebuhr uses to describe all other religions. These are characterised by a rigorous attempt - more rigorous than science or philosophy - to present reality as a unified whole and to regard "all discords and incongruities as provisional or illusory... (and) in which a universal principle of meaning is sought either within the structures of the world or within some universal subsistence above and beyond the structures."[31] Buddhism may be regarded as the most consistent form of culture religion, which from the standpoint of pure mysticism regards the temporal world, including the particular self, as essentially meaningless. A modern version of this form of spirituality, for Niebuhr, is the work of Aldous Huxley.

The emphasis of that Christian faith which was Niebuhr's inheritance upon the unique, the contradictory, the paradoxical, and unresolved mystery stands in striking contrast to the logic of the culture religions. For example, the Christian doctrine of creation ex nihilo is world-affirming, whilst at the same time affirming the suprarational character of the mystery beyond natural and rational causalities. This doctrine, therefore, indicates a realm of freedom and mystery beyond reason's capacity to comprehend, whereby the final irrationality of the "giveness of things is frankly accepted."[32] Biblical eschatology is another example of the paradoxical in Christian faith. It affirms "the culmination of time

in a transfigured time... that our partial simultaneity will not be annulled by God's totem simul, that the culmination means not the annulment but the fulfillment of the temporal process." These conceptions of the beginning and the end "are rationally absurd, or at least paradoxical, but they guard the Christian interpretation of life... from either a meaningless time or a self-fulfilling time."(33)

The Christian interpretation of the beginning and the end provide the framework for the positive content of the Christian Gospel "which has to do with man's freedom and God's freedom, with man's sin and God's grace."(34) The Christian answer to the human predicament is summarized by Niebuhr in the following passage:

> "a divine mercy toward man, revealed in Christ, which is at once a power enabling the self to realize itself truly beyond itself in love, and the forgiveness of God toward the self which even at its best remains in partial contradiction to the divine will... In the Christian faith the self in its final freedom does not find its norm in the structures either of nature or of reason. Nor is either able to bind the self's freedom or guarantee its virtue, as the proponents of 'natural law' would have it. The principle of rationality... does not secure the virtue of the self as in the thought of Kant. For the self can make use of logic for its ends... Nor is evil in the self the provisional confusion and cross-purposes of natural passion before ordered by mind as in Aristotle."(35)

The Christian concept of the dignity and misery of man as being of one piece, as Pascal asserted, is closer to truth about man than Renaissance and modern conceptions of man which assert man's dignity to the exclusion of man's capacity for sin.

Niebuhr uses the term "drama" to describe the Christian understanding of the engagement between God and individual and collective man, because neither the life of the individual nor of mankind can "be conceived in strictly rational terms of coherence."(36) In the drama of engagement between man and God, the only certainty from the Christian viewpoint is:

> "that evil cannot rise to the point of defeating God; that every form of egotism, self-idolatry, and defiance stands under divine judgement; that this judgement is partially executed in actual history... that history remains morally ambiguous to the end; and that a divine redemptive love is always initiating a reconciliation between God and

> man. According to this answer, a suffering divine love is the final coherence of life...
>
> "(This) Christian answer, adequate for a full understanding of both the good and the evil possibilities of human freedom, involves a definition of God which stands beyond the limits of rationality. God is defined as both just and merciful... He is defined in trinitarian terms. The Almighty creator, who transcends history, and the redeemer who suffers in history are two and yet one. The Holy Spirit, who is the final bond of unity in the community of the redeemed, represents... the ultimate harmony, which includes both the power of the creator and the love of the redeemer."(37)

The doctrines of the Atonement and the Trinity cannot successfully be explained in rational terms, in spite of attempts in Christian theology to do so. Justice degenerates into legalism, and love into sentimentality without the doctrine of atonement, says Niebuhr.

The ultrarational "pinnacles of Christian truth" which embrace paradox and contradiction, Niebuhr believes can only be made plausible when they are understood as "the keys which make the drama of human life and history comprehensible and without which it is either given a too-simple meaning or falls into meaningless."(38) Thus Niebuhr believes that, in spite of his criticisms of it, existentialism is a revolt against the naivety of traditional rationalism, and logical positivism expresses a scepticism obscured by idealism.

Niebuhr argues that his assertion that the Christian apologetic validates the ultrarational affirmations of the faith by showing them to be the key to understanding the drama of individual and collective life, is supported by the Old and New Testaments. He cites as an example the understanding of a suffering God:

> "It is in searching for the ultimate meaning of the morally intolerable suffering of righteous and comparatively innocent Israel that Chapter 53 of Isaiah first establishes the relation between a moral obscurity in history with what becomes in the New Testament the final clarification of the moral obscurity of history, a suffering God. Paul rejoices in the fact that... the message of the Cross, becomes in the eyes of faith the key which unlocks the mysteries of life and makes sense out of it."(39)

Niebuhr now turns his attention to the "unremitting problem" of the relationship between the validity of Christian truth and the

cultural disciplines which search for coherence in nature, life and history. As we have seen, Niebuhr detects two main traditions which have emerged in response to this problem.(40) On the one hand there is the tradition characterised by Luther which emphasises, to a greater or lesser extent, the irrational character of Christian truth. On the other hand there is the tradition, characterised by Aquinas, which seeks to express Christian truth in rational terms, thereby obscuring the deep incongruities in human life and history.

Neither the content of Christian faith nor the character of human life and history make it possible for us to rely upon an interpretation of life based on coherence and rationality. But, Niebuhr argues, there are serious perils in the opposite approach of Christian existentialism. In the previous chapter we examined his criticisms of Kierkegaard and Barth which highlight these perils.

What, then, is the way forward? Niebuhr is committed to finding a way of relating Christian truth and the cultural disciplines. This can be seen in the following quotation:

> "There is, in short, no possibility of fully validating the truth in the foolishness of the Gospel if every cultural discipline is not taken seriously up to the point where it becomes conscious of its own limits and the point where the insights of the various disciplines stand in contradiction to each other, signifying that the total of reality is more complex than any scheme of rational meaning which may be invented to comprehend it."(41)

The way forward, for Niebuhr, lies in a position which he defines as <u>biblical realism</u>, which escapes the difficulties inherent in the thought of Barth and Kierkegaard, and yet may justifiably be described by the term "neo-orthodoxy":

> "... criticisms of the two best-known forms of Christian existentialism imply a third position which would distinguish itself from both by taking the coherences and causalities of life and history more seriously than Kierkegaard. On the other hand, it rejects the biblical literalism into which Barth is betrayed and his attitude toward the disciplines of philosophy and the sciences. We might well define this position as biblical realism."(42)

By taking accumulated evidence of the natural sciences seriously in his biblical realism, Niebuhr differs in one important point from the biblical world-view. On the evidence of the natural sciences he is convinced "that the realm of natural causation is

more closed, and less subject to divine intervention, than the Biblical world view assumes."(43) This conclusion has certain important consequences. As he puts it, it causes him to discard "one kind of miracle, and miracle is the dearest child of faith."(44)

Not all miracles are discarded in Niebuhr's biblical realism. The healing miracles of Jesus, for example, are credible because they take into account that man is more than the sum total of his physical and psychological needs; that he has a spiritual dimension. The evidence of psychosomatic medicine, he believes, corroborates such a view.

"But", says Niebuhr, "we do not believe in the virgin birth, and we have difficulty with the physical resurrection of Christ. We do not believe, in other words, that the revelatory events validate themselves by a divine break-through in the natural order."(45)

By adopting this attitude, Niebuhr argues that a significant gain has been made. A gain in keeping with Christ's own rejection of signs as authentications of his messianic mission. Revelatory truths must be apprehended by repentance and faith, "and cannot merely be accepted as a historical fact, validated by the miraculous character of the fact. The deeper truth must be apprehended by becoming the key which unlocks the mystery of what man is and should be and of what God is in relations with man."(46)

On the other hand, biblical realism is entirely in agreement with the Old and New Testaments when it interprets "the drama of human history as an engagement between man and God", and "can recognise in the course of history particular events which have a special depth and penetrate to the meaning of the whole, that is, revelation."(47)

Niebuhr acknowledges the perils of the kind of interpretation embodied in his biblical realism. It can be said that Christianity, on this view, has been reduced to yet another philosophy. For to say, as Niebuhr does, that "historical facts (must be taken) seriously but not literally... may be on the way of not taking them as historical facts at all."(48)

However, Niebuhr believes that the gains made by adopting a biblical realism approach are significant. For example, he is able to interpret the fall of man as myth, and not as historical fact, thereby rejecting notions of biologically inherited corruption,

whilst at the same time insisting that evil is an inevitable condition of man's finiteness. But he recognizes that this interpretation of evil stands "on the edge of Platonism." The same principle applies in his rejection of the end of the world as a literal event. He is aware, however, that this rejection can "easily obscure the eternity at the end of time and have only an eternity over time left, again a movement toward Platonism."(49)

There is no simple solution to the problems of which Niebuhr is conscious in the biblical realism he proposes. He makes the point, however, that the great Christian existentialists Pascal, Luther, and Kierkegaard thought in a world in which modern science had not yet radically altered the conception of Nature. On the other hand, Barthians disregard the evidences of modern science. This approach is untenable, in Niebuhr's view.

If a way forward is to be found for the apologetic task, Niebuhr believes that it must incorporate the evidences of modern science. He therefore makes two proposals:

> "1) A radical distinction between the natural world and the world of human history must be made, however much history may have a natural base. The justification for this distinction lies in the unique character of human freedom. Almost all misrepresentations of human selfhood... are derived from the effort to reduce human existence to the coherence of nature. 2) Human history must be understood as containing within it the encounters between man and God in which God intervenes to reconstruct the rational concepts of meaning which men and cultures construct..."(50)

Niebuhr does not enlarge upon the "two primary propositions" he makes regarding the way forward for apologetics. He does, however, indicate the manner in which God is encountered in human history. In a tightly-knit argument which follows upon his propositions, he writes:

> "The true God is encountered in (a) creativities which introduce elements into the historic situation which could not have been anticipated... In history this creativity appears as grace, as a form of election for which no reason can be given, as in God's covenant with Israel.... (b) God is encountered in judgement whenever human ideals, values, and historical achievements are discovered to be in contradiction to the divine... Included in such historical events are the prophetic testimonies which fathom the contradiction between the human and the divine. God speaks to the believer... through the testimony of the prophets...

> No reason for these prophetic insights can be given. They are not anticipated in the highest culture, but they can by faith be incorporated into a new interpretation of the meaning of history. (c) Events in which the divine judgements lead to a reconstitution of life. These are revelations of redeeming grace in which the old self, including the collective self of false cultures is destroyed, but the destruction leads to new life. The Bible rightly represents the whole drama of Christ as the final point in the Heilgeschichte, for here every form of human goodness is revealed in its problematic character. But a recognition of that fact makes a new form of goodness possible...
>
> These events come to the believer as given. They can therefore not be anticipated by any philosophy of coherence..."(51)

The historic events which are central to the Christian faith, cannot by their very nature be anticipated by rational philosophy. It is, for Niebuhr, one of the presuppositions of the Christian faith that there is an "existential incoherence" between the human and divine will. For this reason the historic events or revelation can only be appropriated by faith; that is, existentially rather than rationally. Recognition of their truth requires an attitude of repentance towards false attempts at coherence.

"Furthermore", writes Niebuhr, these historic events "assert a relevance between a divine freedom and a human freedom, across the chasm of the inflexibilities of nature which have no other message but death, to this curious animal, man, who is more than an animal."(52)

There need be no great gulf fixed between the historic events affirmed by the Christian faith, and the cultural disciplines. They can be related speculatively to these disciplines, and make sense out of them. Reason can thus follow after faith. But it can also precede it in the sense that reason can point to the limits of rational systems of coherence in understanding reality in general, and in particular man's place within that reality. If, as Niebuhr argues, it is granted that the full dimension of the human spirit cannot be contained within any rational system of coherence, then it cannot be understood at all "without presupposing a dimension of divine freedom above the coherences of nature and mind as its environment; which in its endless self-transcendence knows that all judgements passed upon it by history are subject to a more ult-

imate judgement...; and, finally, which is abortively involved in overcoming the incongruity of its existence as free spirit and as object in nature, either by denying its freedom (sensuality) or by denying its finiteness (hybris)... The final answer to this incoherence between the human and the divine will is the divine suffering mercy; and for this no reason can be given."(53)

Having delineated the main features of his biblical realism, Niebuhr concludes his essay by examining briefly the gains made by adopting such a position. He argues that many "sophisticated moderns" find the "smooth pictures of man and history" apparent in modern culture grossly inadequate. This may be viewed as a "negative" proof of the affirmations of the Christian faith. By this he means that the Christian understanding of man and history is acknowledged to be more adequate than modern alternatives, and cites an historian in support of this contention:

> "It cannot be denied that Christian analyses of human conduct and of human history are truer to the facts of experience than alternative analyses. (But he adds) whether the truth of these analyses can be derived only from the presuppositions of the Christian faith remains to be determined."(54)

On the other hand, and more positively:

> "... we are where we always have been. Faith is not reason... The situation for faith is only slightly altered by the new picture of a quasi-autonomous nature, created by God, not maintained by His fiat from moment to moment. No sign can be given but that of the prophet Jonah, by which Jesus meant the sign of death and resurrection. This is to say, whenever the vicissitudes from which the self, either individually or collectively, suffers are appropriated by faith as divine judgements and not as meaningless caprice, they result in the love, joy, and peace of a new life... A theology which both holds fast to the mystery and meaning beyond... coherences and also has a decent respect for the order and meaning of the natural world cannot be the queen of the sciences, nor should she be the despised and neglected handmaiden of her present estate."(55)

(4) CHRISTIAN REALISM AND THE PROBLEM OF VALIDATION

Niebuhr's essay "Coherence, Incoherence, and Christian Faith" is his most methodological statement of position. It must therefore be seen as a microcosm of his theological method. For this reason subsequent chapters of this analysis of Niebuhr will elaborate the themes delineated in that essay.

Even his most theologically methodological statement does not make explicit the method implicit in his thought. It is rather a statement of position over against those he believed to be inadequate. For example, he is critical of the Christian existentialists, and wishes to move beyond them. But it is only from his criticisms of Pascal, Kierkegaard, and Barth that one may deduce the manner in which he wishes to do this. In other words, his position is negatively defined rather than positively stated. Another example is the fact that his propositions regarding the way forward for apologetics come at the end of the essay, where they are stated but not elaborated.

Implicit throughout his essay is Niebuhr's use of 'adequacy' as a test of the truth of Christian faith. For example, he argues that the "suprarational" affirmations of Christian faith are validated by their ability to provide the keys with which to comprehend the drama of life and history as meaningful. Niebuhr makes use of the criterion of 'adequacy' rather than 'coherence' in his method. He is on record as saying that he is in complete agreement with the London "Times Literary Supplement" that the Christian doctrine of original sin is the best attested of the Christian doctrines. In spite of the irrational character of that doctrine, it is more adequate to describe the human situation than those schemes which use the criterion of 'coherence' when attempting to do so.

Niebuhr does not elaborate on what we have described as the use of adequacy implicit in his validation of the affirmations of Christian faith. His whole essay is a search for a way forward for Christian apologetics and social ethics. In this search he rejects rationalism and extreme forms of Christian existentialism on the grounds that they cannot do justice to (are not adequate to describe) human life and history as we experience them. In the commerce

between faith and the world, the truth of Christian faith is affirmed - not by appeal to some ultimate authority, whether it be God, the Bible, or personal experience - but by its adequacy to 'make sense of' the reality of human experience and history. The traditional sources of authority for the Christian may be accepted as authoritative, he argues implicitly throughout the essay, only because they meet the criterion of adequacy.

There is, we believe, in this essay a methodology which Niebuhr never explicitly elaborates. He uses the criterion of 'adequacy' to judge both rationalism and extreme forms of Christian existentialism, and by that same criterion to postulate what he calls "biblical realism". He argues that biblical realism is more adequate than other positions, and that it provides the key to understanding the relationship between the faith and the world. Rational systems of coherence fail in that they cannot adequately account for the ambiguities, for novelty, for particularity as they undoubtedly appear in human history. Extreme existentialism fails because it cannot take the findings of the cultural disciplines seriously. Biblical realism, whilst not without problems, can in Niebuhr's view clarify the drama of human existence and human history. It is therefore more adequate, and provides a way forward for Christian apologetics.

We turn now to Niebuhr's exposition of biblical realism to examine some points in his statement which tend to obscure rather than to clarify it.

(a) Truth Within The Tradition

At a later point we will show that for Niebuhr Christian Realism denotes both a theological method and a Christian tradition. As a method it uses the principle of adequacy to test the truth of Christian faith. As a Christian tradition, it is that which, interpreted and modified by Niebuhr, runs through the Old Testament prophets, the New Testament, and Augustine, to the Reformers, Pascal, and Kierkegaard.

Nieb hr's exposition of biblical realism contained in his essay would be strengthened if he were to draw a distinction between that which is tr e <u>within</u> a tradition, and how the tradition itself is verified in history and in human experience.

From his essay, and from his writings in general, it would appear that Niebuhr does not consider the gains made by linguistic analysis in clarifying what we have called the 'truth within the tradition'.

Linguistic analysis, in the words of Alisdair MacIntyre, is concerned "to show how an expression is used so that it has point and purpose. So the philosopher's approach to language is both empirical and normative... (Thus, for example, the statement "God loves us") can only be understood correctly in the whole context of religious discourse."(56)

There are several crucial points in Niebuhr's analysis of biblical realism which the therapeutic tool of linguistic analysis would greatly elucidate. At points in his argument, Niebuhr uses phrases like "No reason but God's mysterious grace can be given for the covenant"(57); "a form of election for which no reason can be given, as in God's covenant with Israel"(58); "no reason for these prophetic insights can be given. They are not anticipated by the highest culture..."(59); and "The final answer to this incoherence between the human and the divine will is the divine suffering mercy; and for this no reason can be given."(60)

Niebuhr's use of the word "reason" in these contexts is puzzling. Does he mean by it that which is not subject to empirical verification? Does he mean that the One who establishes the Covenant is a transcendent God and cannot therefore be the object of empirical means of verification? If his use of the word "reason" is intended to make the point that the transcendent God cannot be comprehended merely by rational means, then of course Niebuhr is right. But the question with which he is wrestling in his essay is: How do we know that the "ultrarational pinnacles" of Christian faith are true? He is concerned, therefore, to give reasons for the truth of Christian faith. We believe that the criterion or test of the truth of Christian faith, for Niebuhr, is what we have called the 'principle of adequacy' - this is implicit in his method.

To say no reason can be given for election, or covenant, or the doctrine of a divine suffering mercy, is to obscure the argument Niebuhr is making. The reason for obscurity would seem to lie in his failure to distinguish between what we have called 'truth within the tradition', and how the tradition itself is tested and modified

in relation to the totality of human experience.

Within the language game of the Hebrew-Christian tradition it is possible to give reasons for the election, the covenant, and the idea of a divine suffering mercy. These belong, in the first place to the tradition's understanding of the character of God, and also to the tradition's understanding of revelation as God's unfolding disclosures of Himself in history. That is to say, within the tradition election, covenant and the prophetic role are understood to be inextricably bound to its understanding of the character of God. You cannot speak of covenant or election without speaking of God, and provided you do not use the criteria of verification from another language game, such as science, it is possible to give reasons for a particular affirmation within the tradition - such as covenant - within the context of the tradition itself.

In our discussion of the prophetic method in the first chapter we noted that the prophet could be understood only by those who shared the same tradition as he did. In this sense truth exists within a tradition. What the prophet said was understood to be true or false in the context in which he and his hearers stood.

It was surely clear to Niebuhr that it is possible to give reasons for concepts of election, covenant, and the prophet's role. But because he does not utilize the distinction between 'truth within the tradition' and 'testing the tradition', the force of his argument in his essay is somewhat blunted.

Having said this, it must be added that the tradition itself cannot be said to be true, simply because it holds together, and because reasons can be given for the affirmation of faith within the tradition itself. If this were so, it would be possible to have a coherent 'system' which is in no way relevant or applicable to the totality of human experience. As Niebuhr rightly says, one of the crucial tasks facing Christian apologetics today is how to relate the affirmations of the faith to what he calls the "wisdom of the world".

(b) Testing The Tradition

Throughout his essay Niebuhr is searching for a way of testing the truth of his tradition - which he expresses in a form he calls Biblical Realism - against the totality of human experience. As we have seen, he argues that the doctrine of creation ex nihilo is true because it is world-affirming (as opposed to Buddhism which regards the temporal world as essentially meaningless). But it is also true because it affirms that the world is more than the sum total of its natural and rational causality: it points to a "supra-rational... mystery" beyond this causality. The doctrine of creation, which in the Hebrew-Christian tradition is arrived at as a result of its understanding of the character of the transcendent God, is true because it provides the key to understanding the world. A key which our understanding of natural causation, and the limits of reason, cannot give.

What Niebuhr seems to be saying here is that the Buddhist cannot be right, because the world of reality does have meaning. Tested against the totality of human experience pure mysticism cannot be right because the temporal world is not only real, but also meaningful. On the other hand, the world is more than the sum total of our understandings of natural and rational causation.

Naturalism and rationalism may provide us with invaluable data about man, but they cannot in the final analysis provide us with an adequate key to understanding man and the world. Niebuhr, in fact, spent a great deal of his life fighting those forms of naturalism and rationalism which boasted ultimate truth about man and the world. The criterion which he used in this fight, whilst never explicitly elaborated, was the criterion of adequacy. For example, he argues that Pascal's understanding of the grandeur and misery of man is closer to the truth than the Renaissance and modern understandings which emphasise man's dignity to the exclusion of his capacity to sin.

We have said that 'adequacy' is the means of testing the tradition implicit in Niebuhr's essay. In his Intellectual Autobiography Niebuhr discusses his approach to the question of testing the truth of Christian faith. He begins by pointing to the interplay between the presuppositions of faith and the facts of experience,

and describes it in this way:

> "It is difficult to know whether the criticism of both liberal and Marxist views of human nature and history was prompted by a profounder understanding of the Biblical faith; or whether this understanding was prompted by the refutation of the liberal and Marxist faith by the tragic events of contemporary history which included two world wars and the encounter of a liberal culture with two idolatrous tyrannies, first Nazism and then Communism, resting respectively upon the foundations of moral cynicism and moral utopianism. About the circular relation between the presuppositions of faith and the facts of experience I must say more presently."(61)

Niebuhr expands and defends his understanding of the "circular relation between faith and experience" in answering critics of the Barthian school. They had argued that there is no way of compelling faith rationally, and since faith governs the conclusions one arrives at, there is no way of using experience to determine faith. In a key passage, Niebuhr defends his understanding:

> "Since a guiding presupposition, held by faith, acts as a kind of filter for the evidence adduced by experience, it would seem that the theologians are right and that the modern scientist is wrong in making 'experience' a final arbiter of truth. But the matter is more complex. Guiding presuppositions do indeed color the evidence accumulated by experience; but they do not fully control experience. Presuppositions are like spectacles worn by a nearsighted or myopic man. He cannot see without the spectacles. But if evidence other than that gathered by his sight persuades him that his spectacles are inadequate to help him see what he ought to see, he will change his spectacles."(62)

Thus Niebuhr concedes what someone of strict Barthian persuasion cannot concede. Experience can modify the "spectacles" one wears, and it can even cause the wearer to discard them altogether. The process of modification of presuppositions, and even the discarding of presuppositions is illustrated in Niebuhr's view of modern secularism:

> "Modern secularism results from the disavowal of traditional Jewish and Christian faiths on what seems to be the incontrovertible evidence of experience. These faiths assumed a mystery of a person and a will behind the observable phenomena of the world. Science proved these phenomena to be related to each other in sequences of efficient causation... Therefore various types of 'secularism' which regarded the whole of reality

> as self-explanatory and self-fulfilling, and which interpreted man in terms of his relation either to the realm of reason or to the realm of nature, seemed to have compelling evidence in their favour. Traditional and historic religions seemed passé. It is therefore necessary to recount the experiences of modern man which are most obviously at variance with this modern picture of the human enterprise... that there was something wrong with the spectacles through which modern man looked at himself and his world."(63)

Niebuhr believed that the apologetic task comprises of an analysis and critique of the presuppositions of modern culture, and an exposition of the manner in which Christian faith may provide a key to understand contemporary experience beyond the limits of reason and natural causation.

Man's capacity to transcend not only the processes of nature but also the operations of his own reason; to stand as it were above "the structures and coherences of the world", points to that dimension of human existence which makes rationalistic and naturalistic interpretations of existence inadequate.

Modern attempts to embrace this dimension of the human spirit elaborate a form of mysticism. Niebuhr cites Bertrand Russell's Mysticism and Logic and Aldous Huxley's The Perennial Philosophy as examples of an attempt "to delve into the realm of pure mystery (about which nothing can be said but that it is at the same time the fullness of being and the absence of being)."(64) This form of mysticism seriously misunderstands man. In asserting that only the divine is good and that all temporal and individual particularity is evil, mysticism has no means of understanding man's existence as an historical creature. "Christianity (on the contrary) is inextricably bound up with the idea of the historical character of man."(65)

Niebuhr's major criticism of the philosophies which emphasise ontological categories, whether naturalistic, idealistic, or mystical is that they cannot do justice to man as an historical creature. The Christian faith makes two fundamental assertions upon which it must stand or fall:

> "The Christian faith asserts about God that He is a person and that He has taken historical action to overcome the variance between man and God... Both propositions are absurd from a strictly ontological standpoint."(66)

Ontology has difficulty with the concept of God's personality, because the concept of personality is full of connotations of finite-

ness and cannot therefore be ascribed to God. Yet, has Bradley not shown, that if God is absolute then He cannot be person? And so this philosophy is involved in "an absurdity in the effort to escape an absurdity"; it assigns to God 'absolutes' of different kind, but it denies its God the simple freedom which man himself undoubtedly enjoys. Its difficulty lies in the fact that the concept of personality cannot be contained in a rational system, according to Niebuhr.

It is regretable that Niebuhr does not elaborate upon the Christian affirmation of God as person. He simply asserts that whereas an ontological standpoint has great difficulty with the concept of God's personality, the Christian faith asserts about God that He is person. At the time of writing his Intellectual Autobiography, Niebuhr believed that Christian apologetics must explore the dimensions of personality and history:

> "We must make it clear that the concepts of both personality and history are ontologically ambigous. Personality, whether God's or man's, is defined only in a dramatic and historic encounter. Though these dramatic and historical media of personality are not inherently 'irrational', they are not subject to the ordinary 'scientific' tests of rational intelligibility. Nothing in history follows as it does in nature or reason, 'in a necessary manner'. The personality is bound by historical destiny rather than by natural or ontological necessity."(67)

Because of what he describes as the "ontological ambiguity" of both personality and history, Niebuhr makes the point that it is significant that artists, dramatists, novelists, and poets have found it easier to understand the faith, while philosophers and scientists have found it difficult to respect it intellectually. This, he believes, is because the concepts of personality and history lend themselves to dramatic interpretation to a greater degree than they do to causal and rational interpretation.

Niebuhr is on record as saying that the biblical text which, for him, expresses the crux of the faith is: "God was in Christ reconciling the world unto Himself", (2 Cor 5:19). This affirmation may not be reducible to an ontological principle, or a propositional statement, but it is adequate in that it provides a basic key to understanding the drama of the self and the drama of history, and because the concepts of personality and history themselves transcend causality and rationality.

As far as Niebuhr is concerned, the only ultimate validation of the affirmations of the Christian faith lies in the quality of life which ensues when a person accepts them, by faith. He writes in his Intellectual Autobiography:

> "There is no way of validating such a proposition (that God is person, and has taken historical action to heal the breach between man and God) philosophically, or of proving that in the ultimate personal encounter between man and God there can be forgiveness... The only validation of such a proposition is the repentance and the new life which must obviously result from genuine repentance."(68)

His essay "Coherence, Incoherence, and Christian Faith" uses much the same reasoning on the question of ultimate validation of the Christian faith. He adds an important rider, however; namely, that the affirmations about God's action in history come to the believer "as given". They can be appropriated only by faith; "that is, existentially rather than speculatively, because the recognition of their truth requires a repentant attitude toward false completions of life from the human standpoint."(69) For the "sin" of dependence upon false completions of life there is a cure. When acknowledged, the cure is "a humble and a charitable life. That testimony can enter into history as a proof of the Christian faith (presumably in the life of the Church), which the unbelievers may see. But if it should be true that even the most righteous life remains in some degree of contradiction to the divine, it is hazardous either for individual Christians or the Church to point to their goodness as proofs of the truth of their faith."(70)

(5) THE "GOD OF THE GAPS": NIEBUHR'S UNEASY DUALISM

In our discussion of some of the roots of Niebuhr's realism at the beginning of this chapter we saw that Niebuhr's manner of handling the tension between the ideal and the actual involved him in a form of "dualism". Whilst this dualism, which he believed to be native to the Hebrew-Christian tradition, is metaphysically 'untidy' it nevertheless enables him to hold to his "faith in God without either identifying him with or losing him in the concrete world."

On the evidence of the essay which has been the subject of our

study in this chapter, dualism remains a problem for Niebuhr. We have already drawn attention to Niebuhr's suggestion that the way forward for apologetics lies in a radical distinction between the natural world and the world of human history. The justification for this distinction, in Niebuhr's view, is twofold. Firstly, he accepts the evidence of the natural sciences that natural causation is "more closed" and "less subject to divine intervention" than the biblical world view presupposes. Secondly, Niebuhr justifies the distinction on the basis of his understanding of the unique and radical nature of human freedom. Man, writes Niebuhr, "is both a creature and a creator... who does not fit easily into any system of rational or natural coherence."(71) According to the Christian view, "the human self arises as an independent and self-determining force in the very social process... in which it is also a creature. Its freedom is a radical one..."(72)

The radical distinction between natural and human history which Niebuhr makes enables him to interpret human history as the stage on which man encounters God, and on which God 'intervenes' to create, to judge, and to reconstitute. He believed that his proposal brought him certain gains. The 'uneasy dualism' evident in Niebuhr's essay is the price he pays for attempting to take the evidence of the natural sciences seriously, whilst at the same time holding to his faith in the "sovereignty of a divine creator, judge, and redeemer."

By accepting a scientific understanding of the natural world, and attempting to ingraft the biblical understanding of a transcendent God active in history, Niebuhr has, in effect, precluded the natural world as a realm of God's activity. In this aspect of his thinking Niebuhr is open to the criticism which Langdon Gilkey makes of neo-orthodoxy in general. Gilkey writes that its attempt at a synthesis between the modern, scientific world view, and that of the Bible

> "was at best only an uneasy dualism, with a naturalistically interpreted world and a Biblically understood God who by his activity in that world gives to it meaning and coherence...
>
> ... the acceptance of the causal order governing finite events meant that observable miracles and special divine interventions were not a possible part of the neo-orthodox framework.
>
> Biblical theologians shuddered as much as did the liberals or the secularists when Cecil B. De Milles'

> camera showed the Israelites walking through the Red Sea between walls of water and staring at the fish! No, said they, God acts in history, but not that way! He is no miraculous cause on the surface of history where natural and historical causes are exclusively at work as far as 'explanations' are concerned."(73)

Niebuhr's acceptance of a scientific understanding of the natural world may itself be based on a mechanistic model which modern science no longer uses. The concepts of unbreakable law and rigid causality operating throughout nature are being replaced with a concept, which goes back to Hume, of statistical regularity. The present day scientist is more likely to speak of a high degree of probability of one event following upon another, than of one event causing another. Even granting that Niebuhr operated with a too-mechanistic scientific model, Gilkey's criticism is valid. For the effect of Niebuhr's radical distinction between natural and human history is an "uneasy dualism" which precludes any notion of God's activity within the natural world, except in the general way evidenced by his treatment of the doctrine of creatio ex nihilo.

A corollary of Niebuhr's uneasy dualism is that, in effect, it tends toward a "God of the gaps" argument. If we accept Niebuhr's argument that scientific processes are less open to God's activity than the biblical world view presupposes then God becomes the Deus ex Machina reminiscent of Dietrich Bonhoeffer's "working hypothesis" for the "solving of insoluble problems" of human existence.(74) It is but a short step to argue, as Bonhoeffer does, that "as in the scientific field, so in human affairs generally what we call 'God' is being more and more edged out of life, losing more and more ground... Even though there has been surrender on all secular problems (it is argued, however, that) there still remain the so-called ultimate questions - death, guilt - on which only 'God' can furnish an answer, and which are the reason why God and the Church and the pastor are needed... But what if one day they no longer exist, if they too are answered without 'God'?"(75)

On the reasoning of Niebuhr's essay "Coherence, Incoherence, and Christian Faith" it is hard not to conclude that his is a "God of the gaps" argument, although we believe this is not his intention. He has severely limited the sense in which we may speak of God in relation to the natural world. He has argued that in the face of the "incongruities" and "incoherences" of human experience Christian

faith may provide a key by which they can be seen as meaningful. Paradoxically, the effect of Niebuhr's argument concerning man's "radical freedom" is to make the field of human history less open to "divine intervention" than the biblical-Christian tradition presupposes, although we do not believe this is his intention. We shall return to the problems raised by Niebuhr's "propositions" concerning the apologetic task in our final chapter.

At this point it should be noted that it is one of Niebuhr's major contributions, in keeping with the biblical tradition, that he insists on maintaining a divine reference-point from which every attempt on the part of man to create structures of meaning must be judged. Niebuhr's own pilgrimage, and the events of contemporary history, convinced him that every attempt to create structures of meaning, and to develop systems of collective life from within history itself contained within them a threat to both life and history. He held, therefore, that faith in the "sovereignty of a divine creator, judge, and redeemer" is essential. "The final test of any religion", writes Niebuhr, "must be its ability to prompt ethical action upon the basis of reverence for personality."(76) We question, however, whether the radical dichotomy between natural and human history is essential, and ask whether it is in fact not destructive of his goals.

Perhaps it is Niebuhr's revolt against all those forms of thought which emphasise 'coherence', and his polemic against "soft utopianism" with its credo of the "inevitability of progress," that accounts for his failure to make use of the insights of process philosophy. It is significant that the only reference to Alfred North Whitehead in his Gifford Lectures is in the chapter entitled "The Optimism of Idealism" wherein he criticizes Whitehead's "quasi-idealistic theory" which regards evil as a "cultural lag", and which hopes for "a society which will ultimately be governed purely by rational suasion rather than by force."(77)

Niebuhr does, however, agree with Whitehead's definition of religion. In his Christianity and Power Politics, Niebuhr quotes Whitehead:

> "Religion is a vision of something which stands beyond, behind, and within, the passing flux of immediate things, something which is real, and yet waiting to be realised; something which is

> a remote possibility, and yet the greatest of present facts; something which gives meaning to all that passes, and yet eludes apprehension; something whose possession is the final good, and yet is beyond all reach; something which is the ultimate ideal, and the hopeless quest."(78)

Niebuhr agrees with this definition because it captures the paradoxes and ambiguities which religion seeks to comprehend, and which he himself is insistent on emphasising. Niebuhr therefore finds support for his view that religion issues in a "qualified optimism" in Whitehead's definition, of which he writes;

> "The paradoxes are in the spirit of great religion. The mystery of life is comprehended in meaning, though no human statement of the meaning can fully resolve the mystery. The tragedy of life is recognised, but freedom prevents tragedy from being pure tragedy. Perplexity remains, but there is no perplexity unto despair. Evil is not accepted as inevitable nor regarded as a proof of the meaninglessness of life. Gratitude and contrition are mingled which means that life is both appreciated and challenged."(79)

Whitehead's ability to encompass the ambiguities and paradoxes that belong to religion is what Niebuhr appreciates. Yet Whitehead's definition also makes use of what may be called 'process language', and is expressed in dynamic terms of which there is little evidence in Niebuhr's work. Perhaps it is Niebuhr's too-static view of revelation in which he represents the "whole drama of Christ as the final point in the Heilgeschichte", which comes "to the believer as given",(80) plus his too-mechanistic model of science, that accounts for the scant attention he gives to process philosophy. In this regard it is illuminating to read William Nicholls' assessment of Whitehead's significance:

> "Whitehead... made a breach with classical metaphysics analogous to that which Newton made with medieval and ancient science when he conceived of motion instead of rest as the fundamental state of matter... The metaphysics of the ancient world, on which the classical philosophy of Christianity was founded, assumed that rest was more fundamental than motion, and that motion could only be explained by an unmoved mover. For post-Newtonian physics, motion requires no explanation; rest does... there is a fundamental change here which must effect any post-Newtonian metaphysics. Whitehead makes this change when he takes process instead of substance as the way he conceives the fundamental metaphysical reality. For Whitehead, becoming includes being, instead of the other way round. Thus the time dimension is incorporated into the concept of being for the first time, and metaphysics becomes a history of nature."(81)

From this perspective nature itself has a history, and history is for Niebuhr the fundamental vehicle of revelation. From this perspective Niebuhr's too-mechanistic model of natural science need no longer preclude revelation, since nature itself is in process and can be interpreted as being revelatory.

In this regard, the work of Teilhard de Chardin, whom Ian Barbour has suggested can be interpreted as a process philosopher in the tradition of Whitehead(82), can act as a corrective to Niebuhr's uneasy dualism. For Teilhard criticized static views of nature and cyclic views of history, and insisted on an evolutionary interpretation of the world, which would allow natural history and human hisory to be revelatory.

Teilhard's insistence on an evolutionary motif led him into difficulties with his ecclesiastical superiors; and one of the main reasons was that any such motif tends to give the impression of under-estimating the gravity of sin and evil. We have already seen how Niebuhr reacted to Whitehead by insisting that his mode of thinking was unrealistic and erroneous when it came to the question of evil. Niebuhr nowhere refers to Teilhard's work in his writings; a fact which is not altogether surprising since most of Teilhard's works were translated into English from 1960 onwards. However, if Niebuhr's reaction to Whitehead is any guide, then no doubt he would have had similar problems with Teilhard's evolutionary motif with regard to the question of sin and evil.

We have said that Niebuhr embraced a scientific world view, although his was a too-mechanistic model of the scientific process. Teilhard also embraced a modern scientific world view. Yet, unlike Niebuhr, he believed natural history to be revelatory of God. For Teilhard an evolutionary perspective is not an option that is open to modern man, it is a fundamental truth about the reality of the world. In his Phenomenon of Man Teilhard writes:

> "Evolution is a light illuminating all facts, a curve that all lines must follow... What makes and classifies a 'modern man' (and a whole host of our contemporaries is not yet 'modern' in this sense) is having become capable of seeing in terms not of space and time alone, but also of duration, or - and it comes to the same thing - of biological space-time; and above all having become incapable of seeing anything otherwise - anything - not even himself."(83)

The significance of the word 'biological' when added to 'space-time' is that it implies a direction. The notion of direction has led Teilhard into controversy with biologists who argue that he is smuggling into his evolutionary scheme a sense of "purpose". The controversy is sharpened because Teilhard uses the word "orthogenesis" to describe his view; a word which in the past has been frequently used by philosophers and theologians as a means of introducing some notion of divine purpose into the natural process of evolution. For Teilhard the concept of evolution is not conceived of as an entirely random process. As Bernard Towers has pointed out there is a profound pessimism lurking in all purely mechanistic theories of the universe, based on what he terms a "billiard-ball" concept of matter, which view biological evolution as the chance product of random events; the human mind itself being the product of such a chance process. In such a view, as Towers shows, no meaning can be attached to anything in the world, for the world itself is a product of random chance. "Ultimately the theory is self-defeating because there is no meaning to be attached to 'meaning'! The Christian reacts either by ignoring the problem, or by retreating into a fundamentalism that is wholly anti-intellectual, or by putting his trust in an 'existential' encounter with God. The agnostic or atheistic existentialist has nothing but himself and other 'absurdities' in an absurd world to fall back on. If he is honest, he finds himself, as Sartre did, with the 'Nausea'."(84)

Teilhard uses the term "orthogenesis" to point to the fact that there is direction in the evolutionary process, partly because he argues that nature itself has a history, and partly because he argues that man himself has a hand in the process of evolution. Philip Hefner explains Teilhard's theory in this way:

> "(1) Evolution is not, at all levels, entirely random; there are anti-chance factors built into the process... Thus, Teilhard's use of the term "orthogenesis" to refer to the "drift" of development that results from each generation building upon previous forms. In this sense, evolution "gropes" its way, but is influenced by the gropings of its predecessor stages and by its environment... it is clear that he believed that the "direction" or "drift" of evolution could be documented without recourse to divine revelation or special insight.

> (2) The role of chance in evolution is not the same after man's appearance as before... man himself has taken a hand in his evolution. The rise of the noosphere (Teilhard's term for the advent of thinking man) is a sign that evolution has become conscious of itself, inasmuch as species self-awareness is awareness of the aims of evolution (i.e., toward increased complexification - collectivization plus personalization) and is self-conscious action toward the accomplishment of those aims."(85)

Thus, for Teilhard, nature itself has a history which is in dynamic process, with an intrinsic "direction"; and man himself has a responsible role to play in the evolutionary process. It is often emphasised by scholars of Teilhard's work that he was no naive optimist with a nineteenth-century view of the 'inevitability of progress'. He knew what it was to suffer personally, and he lived through a period of history which saw the ravages of two World Wars and the rise of the same totalitarian systems which, as we have seen, caused Niebuhr to modify his own thinking. Yet, as Martin Jarrett-Kerr points out, Teilhard began Phenomenon of Man before nuclear fission was thought possible and concluded it after Hiroshima; and he did so without altering one word of this work.(86) He was able to do this because he held a view of progress which refers to the increase of consciousness, and particularly of self-awareness. Progress, for Teilhard, is movement along the line of complexification, and that movement is slow in the same way that all organic processes are slow.

Teilhard did not believe that the process of evolution was autonomous; he knew that man could decide to work against the processes of his own development, and has done many times in history. Pain and sin are not precluded from Teilhard's view of progress. Georges Crespy paraphrases an essay by Teilhard (written in 1947, but never published) which deals with the problem of evil. Creation is seen by Teilhard as a process of uniting, and evil emerges as soon as the process begins because that process is:

> "impregnated with pains and errors. It is statistically inevitable that in the course of the journey some local disorders will appear, and consequently there will result collective disordered conditions with pain in the midst of the living and sin in the midst of man."(87)

Evil is thus to be found within the creative process, but subordinate to the creative activity of God. The myth of the Fall is not interpreted as a dateable event in history, but rather as the intrinsic capacity within the natural order and the human condition

to obstruct the destiny toward which God is moving his creation. Crespy comments upon Teilhard's view of evil in this way:

> "Teilhard... affirms that evil is such only evolutively, that is, only relatively to future good. Evil is evil only as a consequence of a passion for the best. In other words, once again there is evil only if the world is going somewhere, if it has meaning and direction. And then evil is the nondirection of this direction and the nonmeaning of this meaning."(88)

For Teilhard, it is one thing to locate the forces of evil within the creative processes, it is quite another to conclude that these forces will finally prevail. It is an act of faith on Teilhard's part, based on the phenomena which he observes in the process of evolution, that the process of complexification will ultimately prevail. Such an act of faith is for Teilhard more true to the observable facts than the opposite 'random' or 'chance' understandings of evolution. Teilhard's very act of faith itself is in keeping with a truth within the scientific tradition, which goes back to Mill, that the inductive sciences depend on the presupposition that nature is uniform - a presupposition which cannot be established by the methods of inductive science.

The philosopher, Brian Foster, in a series of articles published in the early Thirties, argues that the Christian doctrine of Creation which implies "that the material is real qua material" is at the base (albeit unacknowledged) of the scientific revolution. Foster extends Mill's thesis: "Every science of nature must depend upon presuppositions about nature which cannot be established by the methods of science itself."(89) For Teilhard, a genuine understanding of the evolutionary process, and a recognition of the limits of scientific method, leads him to discern a "presence of Christ" within nature. This Teilhard does in much the same way as Niebuhr, on the basis of historical evidence, discerns a "presence of Christ" in human history.

Thus for Teilhard scientific "research is adoration". The process of creation is an on-going and dynamic one, in which God is at work. Such a view is a synthesis of a biblical understanding of God and the cumulative evidence of scientific observation of the evolutionary process. Niebuhr, in seeking to take seriously the cumulative evidence of the natural sciences whilst at the same time holding to a biblical understanding of revelation, arrives at a different position. In Niebuhr's view a radical dichotomy between the

world of nature and the world of human history is the only way forward for Christian apologetics. We have argued that Niebuhr was led to this conclusion partly as a result of his too-static view of revelation, and partly as a result of his too-mechanistic view of the scientific process. The uneasy dualism in Niebuhr's method leads him into difficulties. He has great difficulty with the notion of the physical resurrection of Christ, and is forced into a highly symbolic interpretation of that "historical event". Such an interpretation, he admits, lays itself open to the serious question as to whether in fact he is any longer speaking of history at all; whether he is not in fact postulating another Christian philosophy.

At this point we ask whether, in the light of a Teilhardian-type synthesis, Niebuhr's radical dichotomy need be an integral part of his method. Can it not be modified without destroying his intention, which is to take seriously the scientific world-view? We believe it can.

We have already said that a Teilhardian-type synthesis requires an act of faith, and that an act of faith is intrinsic in the scientific method itself. There can be no presuppositionless science. One of the recent positions which opposes that of Teilhard is the work of existentialist Albert Camus. It is significant that the figure of Sisyphus is used by both Teilhard and Camus. For Teilhard, Sisyphus is an anti-typical figure who stands for the hopeless, ant-like slave who can see no hope in the process of evolution and the movement of human history. For Camus, Sisyphus is a proto-typical figure whose fate it is to roll the stone up the mountain, always to have it roll down again. For Camus, this is the way things are. He therefore formulates a category of the Absurd, as a fundamental means of interpreting the world:

> "The irrational, the human nostalgia, and the absurd that is born of their encounter - these are the three characters in the drama that must necessarily end with all the logic of which an existence is capable."(90)

For Camus absurdity is the occasion for suicide; and suicide is the only serious philosophical question. Camus himself decides against suicide, and for an ethical life for the sake of his fellow men. This position is, for Teilhard, utterly untenable. Philip Hefner summarizes these two positions in this way:

> "The two positions are clear - both held by Frenchmen near the end of the first half of our century: The one holds that man stands <u>in congruity</u> with evolution and world history, a congruity based on the personalizing character of the world, resonating to his own essential personhood; he is enabled therefore to give himself to the processes of evolution, confident of consummation; the other holds to an intrinsic incongruity between man and reality "out there", since the world is silent to man's cries for meaning, and even though man must give himself to the struggle for human existence - in the face of all odds - he is fighting <u>against</u> creation, and he has no hope of victory or even intelligibility in his struggle; the struggle is an end in itself."(91)

Both interpretations are based on presuppositions which are "acts of faith". Teilhard argues that our world view must be congruous with our understanding of the essence of our self-hood; that man thinks by analogy about the world, about God, and about the future; and the analogy he uses is a personal one, based on what he understands to be the essence of personhood. Camus, on the other hand, argues that there is a basic incongruity between man and the world; that man is fated to fight against an irrational, aimless world.

Teilhard argues that the reliability of the process of evolution is crucial to man; that this "act of faith" is the premise upon which scientific and technological advance is based; and that the reasonableness of any "God-argument" must be located at this point. Hefner comments upon this aspect of Teilhard's position: "If the process of evolution is ultimately trustworthy, then the question arises as to the cause and order of that trustworthiness, to which the concept of God is a reasonable, if not the <u>most reasonable</u>, answer."(92)

It is significant that for both Teilhard and Niebuhr the category of "personhood" is basic. "To make room for thought in the world", writes Teilhard, "I have needed to 'interiorise' matter: ... to provide evolution with a direction, a line of advance and critical points; and finally to make all things double back upon <u>someone</u>... The only universe capable of containing the human person is an irreversibly 'personalising' universe."(93) Niebuhr uses the category of the self to interpret the drama of God's encounter with man in human history; Teilhard by means of analogy uses the category of the personal to interpret the universe as 'at-least-personal'. It is this extension which a Teilhardian-type method is able to make which can free Niebuhr's thought of its uneasy dualism and its tendency to a "God of the gaps"-type argument.

(6) SUMMARY

This chapter has examined Niebuhr's most methodological essay, and made some criticisms of it. The essay "Coherence, Incoherence, and Christian Faith" is viewed as a microcosm of Niebuhr's theological method. The themes contained in it, and the issues which it raises concerning his method, will be the subject of our subsequent chapters. In these we will elaborate these themes, and make some proposals concerning the problems which have been discussed in relation to it. Our intention in this chapter has been, therefore, to provide a framework for the analysis of Niebuhr's theological method which will occupy us in the remaining chapters of this study.

Chapter Four

FAITH AND HISTORY

This chapter offers a detailed examination of the relation between past and contemporary event in Niebuhr's theological method, based largely on his Gifford Lectures and his Faith and History.

A preliminary discussion of 'doubt' as a dynamic process. Niebuhr's pilgrimage re-visited - his 'courage to change' presuppositions in the light of experience. The interplay between faith and experience.

Faith and history - the problem of definition discussed in relation to William Dray's analysis. Historicism and neo-orthodoxy: Troeltsch's challenge.

Niebuhr's view of history, Three contending views of history: the Greek classical view, the biblical-Christian view, and the modern view. A full exposition of Niebuhr's understanding of the biblical-Christian view of history.

Niebuhr's approach to contemporary history. A detailed exposition of his 'handles to history' - revelatory events; myth and symbol; 'tragedy' and 'irony' in the 'drama' of history.

CHAPTER FOUR

FAITH AND HISTORY: NIEBUHR'S THEOLOGICAL METHOD

The difficulties discerned in Niebuhr's essay: "Coherence, Incoherence and the Christian Faith", which we examined in the last chapter, can be interpreted to be of such a serious nature as to discount his contribution as being worthwhile for those who are searching for a way forward. For example, Langdon Gilkey is critical of the dualism he discerns in neo-orthodoxy; a dualism we have pointed to in Niebuhr's thought. Gilkey writes:

> "Neo-orthodoxy was, therefore, on two counts in tune with the contemporary 'secular' mind: (1) it agreed that God was not revealed in ordinary secular life, and (2) it accepted the naturalistic system of space-time events.
>
> It attempted to accept the secular world secularly, but to retain the Biblical and orthodox worlds religiously. As we shall see, this dual posture, while the source of its very considerable power, proved its undoing in the end." (1)

Rubem Alves, on the other hand, criticizes Niebuhr for his too static understanding of the revelatory truth of the Cross because it tends to point up the ambiguities of history without giving any impulse to a theology of hope. He writes:

> "It seems to me that here is one of the reasons why Niebuhr's theology, otherwise so rich in critical resources, has tended to take more conservative positions. His theology sees the cross not primarily as a radical negation that the presence of God in history addresses to the powers that are, in a concrete situation that is to lead to a movement toward the future, but rather as the total relativization of everything in history, which results in the elimination of the sense of direction toward the future. It is true that everything is relative. But if the cross provides not a direction but a relativization of all directions, how is it possible to behave in order to bring about a new tomorrow?." (2)

Gilkey's criticism concerning dualism, and Alves' criticism of Niebuhr's tendency to the "total relativization of everything in history", are serious charges upon Niebuhr's methodology. But they are charges against a man who himself was trying to find a

way forward; a man trying to relate the insights of the faith to the problems and possibilities of contemporary history.

The difficulties inherent in Niebuhr's Christian realism can be interpreted as the consequences of a courageous man's search for criteria for social choice. Courageous; because the difficulties are admitted and the consequences squarely faced. Niebuhr's over-riding concern is to find adequate criteria for social choice. He is unable to accept either Christian or secular rationalism or naturalism. He has difficulty with Christian existentialism in its Kierkegaardian or Barthian forms. Why? Because in none of these does he find an adequate way of dealing with the ambiguities and incoherencies of contemporary history on the one hand; and on the other hand, neither can he find in them adequate criteria for social choice. Here is a man who lived through a turbulent and exciting period of history; whose field of operation is Christian social ethics; and whose concern is to find a way of interpreting contemporary history that is theologically adequate and socially relevant.

In spite of his disclaimers about being a theologian in the narrow sense, Niebuhr is vitally interested in finding a way of interpreting history theologically, whilst at the same time ensuring that he remains in conversation with, and relevant to the physical and social scientists whose researches are throwing up all-important ethical questions. Upon the answers to these questions depends the future of man. Therefore, methodological problems may trip him up, but they do not cause him to give up his task. They will certainly cause him to sharpen his methodological tools, but if necessary he is prepared to work with admittedly inadequate tools. The task will not wait whilst he refines his tools or invents new ones. Others will have to do this. Christian Realism is the 'tool' he uses; and contemporary history is his workshop. It is not always an adequate tool, but in Niebuhr's view it is more adequate than most.

The process by which he came to his Christian Realism, and the significance of this method is important. Important because the question which Niebuhr basically is asking, albeit never explicitly, is the question with which this essay began. Can we deduce from the faith criteria for social choice? It is the

question which surely is basic to anyone working in the field of Christian social ethics.

(1) DOUBT AS A DYNAMIC PROCESS: Niebuhr's Pilgrimage Re-visited

June Bingham entitled her biographical introduction to the life and thought of Reinhold Niebuhr "Courage to Change", thereby providing us with a key to understanding his theological method. That Niebuhr changed and modified his position many times as he wrestled with the larger issues of contemporary history is beyond dispute. But he is no'feather blown about in the winds of change'.

To re-visit the scene of Niebuhr's pilgrimage is to discern the theological significance of doubt as a dynamic process. The verb doubt, in the sense in which we are using it here, is defined by the Concise Oxford Dictionary in these terms: "Feel uncertain about... be undecided about... call in question." In the view of Daniel Jenkins, author of one of the earliest books on the controversy sparked off in theological circles by Bonhoeffer's notion of "religionless christianity", the "discipline of doubt" is one of the new tasks for theology today. He writes:

> "It is of the greatest importance for the Church today that the theologians should accept fully the discipline of doubt as part of their task. They do not need to do this chiefly for apologetic purposes - if they do, their doubt will quickly become dishonest - but in order that they themselves may find true faith and discover the will of God." (3)

The process of calling into question previously-held theological and ethical points of view; the dynamic process of doubt, can be discerned throughout what Niebuhr calls his "torturous" pilgrimage. Niebuhr himself describes what we have called his formative years - the period from 1929 to 1939, his first decade at Union - as the "Ten Years That Shook My World" when writing for The Christian Century's series "How My Mind Has Changed In This Decade" (April 26, 1939).

In his latest book, Man's Nature and His Communities published in 1966 when Niebuhr was 74, his introductory chapter is entitled "Changing Perspectives". Here he summarizes the process of change which he has undergone:

> "The systematic essays are intended to 'revise' previously held opinions only in the sense that they seek to give a systematic account of the revisions which have taken place in the author's mind in a whole lifetime of study and of writing books too frequently. These revisions are of two kinds. On the one hand, they gradually change from a purely Protestant viewpoint to an increasing sympathy for the two other great traditions of Western culture, Jewish and Catholic. They also embody increasingly the insights of the secular disciplines and reflect the author's increasing enthusiasm for the virtues of an open society which allows freedom to all religious traditions and also freedom to analyse and criticise all these traditions through the disciplines of an empirical and historical culture.
>
> On the other hand they give an historical (not, I hope, too autobiographical) account of the torturous path of the author's mind in adjusting the original Protestant heritage of individualism and perfectionism through a world depression and two world wars to the present realities of a highly technical and collective culture, facing the perils of a nuclear age." (4)

The Editors of The Christian Century, in 1964, invited a group of mid-career scholars, many of whom are heirs to the work of the Barth-Bultmann-Tillich-Niebuhr generation, to write for a new series entitled: "How I Am Making Up My Mind." In his contribution to that series Harvey Cox, without using the precise terms, outlines the dynamic process of doubt:

> "The issue of how we should make up our minds theologically is itself a theological issue. It concerns the place and the purpose of theologizing. It includes such considerations as what a theological issue is and how and why theological issues arise. What we think is determined far more than we realize by where we think (our Sitz im Denken) and why we think (the aim of theological enquiry). I would argue that the purpose of theology is to serve the prophetic community. For this reason the place of theology is that jagged edge where the faithful company grapple with the swiftest currents of the age." (5)

The Christian Realism of Niebuhr's "mature years" was hammered out in the crucible of events which included the burgeoning industrialization in the city of Detroit, precipitated by the advent of the mass-produced motor car, and its concomitant political, social,and economic problems and opportunities. During his"formative years" at Union, the United States was nearing the end of a decade of prosperity, which was followed by the Big Crash of

1929. During these years he became increasingly concerned about the rise of the Third Reich which ultimately plunged the world into World War Two.

By disposition and academic interest, Niebuhr was intimately involved in these epoch-making events. He would therefore be in substantial agreement with Cox's view that what theologians think is determined very largely by where they think. In Chapter Two we showed that it is impossible to separate Niebuhr's thought from his life and the events of contemporary American and world history.

It is this capacity to allow contemporary historical events to impinge upon and modify his theological presuppositions, thereby sharpening the theological tools which he uses in his wide-ranging and critical analysis of those same historical events, which made Niebuhr a figure to be reckoned with inside and outside of the Church. To state this in other words, Niebuhr's theological method incorporates doubt as a dynamic process. He does not bring to contemporary events a rigid and inflexible theological "system". If theology be defined as the process of creating a theological system, in which the emphasis is on the systematic creation of a theological "edifice", then Niebuhr would disavow the title 'theologian'. If, however, theology is defined in Cox's terms as having as its purpose "to serve the prophetic community" at that "jagged edge where the faithful company grapple with the swiftest currents of the age" then Niebuhr is a theologian. In terms of our concerns in this essay, it is this dynamic process of doubt which is important for understanding Niebuhr's theological methodology.

What, then, is Niebuhr's theological method? Or, to put the question in another form, how did Niebuhr do theology? On this question, Niebuhr himself gives us very little help. We have already examined, in some detail, the one essay in which he outlines the basic features of his thought. This we did in the last chapter. But that essay compresses his thought into a somewhat formalized statement and fails to account for the changes he underwent. It is therefore inadequate to describe his theological method.

It is our contention that one of the fundamental character-

istics of Niebuhr's method is what we have called the dynamic process of doubt. Evidence for this contention is given in Niebuhr's notion of "the circular relation between the presuppositions of faith and the facts of experience". The notion of the circular relation between faith and the facts of experience is another way of expressing what we have called the dynamic process of doubt. For Niebuhr argues that the presuppositions of faith act as a 'filter' by which we adduce, or draw to a common centre, the data of experience. The presuppositions of faith are like 'spectacles' without which we cannot see. If, however, evidence other than that gathered by the use of these spectacles, leads a man to believe that they are inadequate for proper perception, he will of necessity change his spectacles.

Another way of expressing this is to say that a man of faith has certain basic presuppositions by which he seeks to understand the facts of contemporary experience. If on the evidence of his experiences he begins <u>to doubt</u> whether all or some of his presuppositions are adequate to enable him to 'see' or 'make sense of' those experiences, he is forced to re-examine, and perhaps even modify, the presuppositions themselves. A close reading of Niebuhr's biography, and of his own statements about his pilgrimage, are evidence of the process we have just described: the dynamic process of doubt.

Niebuhr's so-called "fight with Ford", which we described in Chapter Two, provides us with a vivid example of the dynamic process of doubt. His experience in his first and only parish in Detroit is important for understanding his theological method, because as he says it determined his development "more than any books which (he) may have read." (6)

The "simple Christian 'liberal' moralism" which regarded love as the answer to every moral problem was one of the basic presuppositions with which Niebuhr was armed when he went to Detroit. The basic ingredients for the make-up of the 'spectacles' he wore comprised in the main of an upbringing within a conservative and somewhat isolated Evangelical church; an exposure at Yale to the prevailing liberal and pragmatic milieu of the early Twenties; and the important influence of the Social Gospel movement. Whatever content he gave to key concepts of his Protestant

theology was largely determined by the background we have described here.

The realities of the years he spent in Detroit forced Niebuhr to re-examine, and sometimes radically modify his theological presuppositions. Best documented, and already described in some detail, is the radical modification of his liberal and highly moralistic creed which he accepted as tantamount to the Christian faith; namely, "an optimistic faith". It was not the outbreak of the First World War so much as the social realities in Detroit which undermined his youthful optimism, and forced him to reconsider his presuppositions.

One of the basic differences between the contemporaries Barth and Niebuhr lies precisely in their respective Sitz im Denken of those crucial years. Barth's revolutionary "Letter to the Romans" was born out of an agonizing effort to extricate and re-formulate the Christian faith in the face of what appeared to be the immanent collapse of European "Christian" culture. Niebuhr's Sitz im Denken in those early years was of quite a different kind. It was not the immanent collapse of a culture that caused him to doubt his theological presuppositions. On the contrary, Niebuhr was faced on the one hand by a buoyant optimism in the United States which seemed to be borne out by the rapid growth of the motor industry in Detroit: the giant nation was beginning to flex its muscles. On the other hand Niebuhr witnessed the inability of the nation to shape, with anything like the same speed or enthusiasm, a just social order.

It may be argued that the where of Barth's theology inevitably led him to what may be called a reconstruction of a strictly theological kind, in the face of the crisis in Europe: his theology has been described as crisis theology. The where of Niebuhr's theology inevitably led him to concentrate on Christian social ethics. What was being called into question (doubted) where Niebuhr was, was precisely the optimism, idealism, individualism, and "simple Christian 'liberal' moralism" which were part of his heritage. Can a simplistic love ethic deal with the realities of a situation in which technological advance spawns enormous social problems? Niebuhr began seriously to question whether the heritage to which he was an heir, had within it the

capacity for dealing with what he came to see as a major issue: the inability to develop political and social structures adequate for the kind of society which technological progress makes possible. Questions such as these, immediately plunged him into the issues of social ethics, and caused him to doubt whether the heritage to which he was heir, held the answers. In his search for answers, or for more adequate criteria for social action, he launched out upon a "torturous path" of re-appraisal in which he often over-reacted and was often involved in radical contradictions in his attitudes. These he admits:

> "For instance, my social-gospel background made my first reaction to the Versailles peace a reaction of pacifist perfectionism. And my reaction to bourgeois individualism prompted me to the error of using Marxist ideas to emphasize our new collective realities." (7)

However, we have already described how Niebuhr moved pacifism, and beyond socialism, to a 'realist' position given theological frame by an application of his interpretation of the Hewbrew-Christian understanding of man's nature and destiny.

Niebuhr's Gifford Lectures, given on the eve of the Second World War, and his Faith and History, published just after that war, sought to describe the human situation in terms of the Biblical view of man, relying heavily upon the Biblical symbols of 'the image of God in man', and man as 'sinner'. The perspective which he describes in these volumes, arrived at during his mature years, has, on his own admission, not changed greatly during subsequent years. What changed in subsequent years was the way in which he used the dominant symbols of this perspective: the perspective he calls Christian Realism. He describes the change in his use of these symbols in this way:

> "I made a rather unpardonable pedagogical error in <u>The Nature and Destiny of Man</u>... My theological preoccupation prompted me to define the persistence and universality of man's self-regard as 'original sin'. This was historically and symbolically correct. But my pedagogical error consisted in seeking to challenge modern optimism with the theological doctrine which was anathema to modern culture. I was in fact proud and heedless because I had taken pains to deny the historicy of the primitive myth of the fall of Adam in the garden,... and I also disavowed Augustine's horrendous conception that sin is transmitted from generation to generation

> through lust in the act of procreation.
>
> But these labours of modern interpretation of traditional religious symbols proved vain. The reaction to my 'realism' taught me much about the use of traditional symbols. The remnants of social optimism pictured me as a regressive authoritarian, caught in the toils of an ancient legend. But it was even more important that the 'realists', including many, if not most, political philosophers who were in substantial agreement with positions taken in my Gifford Lectures, were careful to state that their agreement did not extend to my 'theological presuppositions." (8)

It is clear from the above quotation that an important feature of the theological perspective of Niebuhr's Christian Realism is his interpretation and use of, Biblical myth and symbol. Another important feature of it is his conviction that this perspective should serve not only the negative function of providing the criteria for a critique of classical and modern views of man. The positive function of this perspective is that it should be the servant of justice in contemporary society; providing the criteria by which such justice can be achieved. This he describes as the "guiding principle" of his mature years:

> "... my strong conviction (is) that a realist conception of human nature should be made the servant of an ethic of progressive justice and should not be made into a bastion of conservatism, particularly a conservatism which defends unjust privileges.
>
> I might define this conviction as the guiding principle throughout my mature life of the relation of religious responsibility to political affairs... the future of democracy does not depend upon mild illusions about human virtues and moral capacities." (9)

It should be noted that it is precisely at this point that Alves, in the quotation at the beginning of this chapter, criticises Niebuhr. For Alves argues that Niebuhr's interpretation of the Cross - a focal symbol in his Biblical Realism - provides no impulse for the bringing about of a 'new tomorrow'. This point will have to be taken up again at a later stage.

There is ample data in Niebuhr's pilgrimage for what we have called the dynamic process of doubt. The data we have used is drawn from his early years because these years are, on his own admission, so important to him. Interesting warrant for this

process comes from the psychology of religion. H.C.Rümke, in his book The Psychology of Unbelief argues that doubt has an important function in the development of religious experience:

> "doubt in itself is not a factor in the origin of unbelief. On the contrary, it is a ferment which helps to deliver the once invested structure. We always see doubt arise in the great crises of life - doubt about everything, about ourselves and about our fellow beings. But every kind of growth has been preceded by doubt." (10)

In describing the development of belief from a psychological viewpoint, Rümke speaks of "two outstanding ways leading to real belief experiences: one along the direct cosmic-religious experience; the other along 'the shapes behind the words'". (11) Rümke argues that, in the course of our development, we acquire words like "God", "Heaven", "Hell", and "Cross"; and we acquire these words whether we grow up in a religious environment or not. In the course of development such words take on a symbolic character, and are laden with various meanings. Behind the words arise the shapes which give content to the words we take with us into puberty.

When what Rümke calls 'the shapes behind the words' are tested in relation to the world as we experience it, they either prove adequate in helping us to make sense of the world we experience, or they undergo modification when found to be inadequate. Our religious vocabulary comes from the tradition in which we stand. The 'shapes behind the words' of that vocabulary develop as a result of the many different influences upon us. Experience in the world tests and modifies 'the shapes behind the words'. In turn, the language of faith enables us to make sense of the world as we experience it. This is a dynamic process. During his Detroit years and in his formative years at Union, one discerns a dynamic interplay between the tradition in which Niebuhr stood and the world as he experienced it. In that interplay he arrived at the position he describes as Christian Realism, and used this position to make sense of his Sitz im Leben. In this sense we speak of doubt as a dynamic process in Niebuhr: a process implicitly built into his theological method.

(2) FAITH AND HISTORY

Throughout this essay we have shown that Niebuhr wished to take history seriously; that he gave considerable weight to both past and contemporary history in his work. We must now establish what he meant by 'history', how he used it in his work, and why he believed history to be important.

(a) The Problem of Definition

One of the problems with the word history is its ambiguity. It is, in fact, used in a variety of ways to mean different things. The word can be used to denote factuality in the sense in which the critical historian uses it when he seeks to establish what happened, to determine why it happened, and to develop some understanding of the effect of what happened on the period he is studying. In this sense the historian makes it his business to study a particular course of events, using the critical tools which have been created for this specific purpose.

The speculative historian, by contrast, seeks to discover in history a pattern of meaning which is in fact beyond the purview of the critical historian. The field of study is the same for both the critical and the speculative historians, but their objectives are different. A speculative historian will search for 'meaning' or 'significance' in historical events, going beyond the purposes of the critical historian, and he will do so in terms of his philosophical presuppositions. Examples of such speculative histories are the work of the German philosopher Hegel; the English historian Arnold Toynbee; and in America the theological interpretation of history by Reinhold Niebuhr. It is these three historians that William Dray chooses as examples of speculative systems.

In discussing speculative philosophies of history, William Dray draws attention to some of the ways in which such systems may be classified. Such classification may, for example, be made by:

> "reference to the 'source of authority' or final basis of argument they recognise. The systems of Hegel, Toynbee, and Niebuhr differ markedly in this regard; they are (or at least claim to be), respectively, metaphysically, empirically, and religiously based. Thus the meaning Hegel finds

> in the course of history can only fully be expounded by metaphysical notions like 'World Spirit', which are derived from his general philosophical position. And the acceptability of his account depends, in the end, upon the acceptability of that position as a whole. Toynbee's view of history, by contrast, is represented as a conclusion forced upon him by an empirical survey. And at least part of it, the assertion of certain historical laws, claims a status analogous to that of an empirically alidated scientific hypothesis. Niebuhr is so much at odds with both of these approaches that at times he denies that he offers, in any comparable sense, a 'philosophy' of history at all. He claims only to show how Christian faith, which transcends rational argument, can give a meaning to otherwise meaningless occurances. He nevertheless appears to be thoroughly involved in the issues raised by the other two approaches. For he denies that metaphysical or empirical investigation can make any sense of history at all.
>
> A more usual way of classifying philosophies of history is by the type of pattern they claim to find in past events. At the most general level of analysis, there are, of course, only three possibilities open. Either history will be found to have a <u>linear</u> pattern - it will be 'going somewhere'; or it will be <u>cyclical</u>, repeating itself endlessly in succeeding peoples and periods; or it will appear <u>chaotic</u>, exhibiting.... only 'the play of the contingent and the unforeseen'". (12)

Conceding that a combination of these basic possibilities appears to some extent in the work of Hegel, Toynbee, and Niebuhr, Dray argues that the linear pattern is dominant in Hegel; the cyclical pattern in Toynbee; and the chaotic pattern in Niebuhr. Of Niebuhr's philosophy, Dray makes this point in regard to dominant patterns:

> "Even Niebuhr, who finds no significant over-all pattern, and who is selected here in part because he comes so close to being a 'chaos' theorist, admits that one can draw lines of progress through the past: the line of technological advance, for example. But he cannot see that any of these pick out developments of much importance from the standpoint of Christian faith." (13)

Whilst in substantial agreement with Dray's classification of Niebuhr as a speculative historian, we would question his assertion that Niebuhr denies the possibility of "empirical investigation" making "any sense of history at all." Niebuhr, as we have seen, consistently argues that the critical disciplines must be taken seriously: be they psychology, sociology,

or critical history. But he also argues, consistently, that it is necessary to go beyond the limits of these disciplines in order to make any sense of the ambiguities evident in the broad sweep of history. It is precisely because he wants to do this that Niebuhr must be said to offer a speculative view of history: though he may disavow the word 'system' in describing his contribution.

It is not our intention here to offer a detailed account of the many problems which relate to the problem of definition in the philosophy of history. It is enough for our purposes to use the widely accepted division of this field into two main parts: critical and speculative history. In seeking to understand Niebuhr's view of history, which is the purpose of this chapter, we accept that we are dealing with a speculative view of history.

There is, however, one problem of definition to which we must give attention because it relates specifically to the emergence of the 'dialectic' or 'neo-orthodox' group of theologians with which Niebuhr is associated. The problem concerns the evolution of modern critical historical enquiry and the presuppositions on which it rests, on the one hand, and the response of so-called dialectical or neo-orthodox theology, on the other. The issue may be expressed in the form of a question: to what degree do the presuppositions of the historian determine the conclusions he reaches in any particular historical research? And a further question: do these presuppositions not, by their very nature, raise insurmountable problems for Christian faith?

Ernst Troeltsch, who was intimately associated with the evolution of critical historical enquiry, addressed himself to this issue. He argued that critical historical enquiry rests on three inter-related principles. And these principles, he argued, are founded upon the acceptance of what can be described as a 'scientific-world-view'.

In his book The Historian and the Believer, Van Harvey summarizes Troeltsch's principles:

> "(1) the principle of criticism, by which he meant that our judgements about the past cannot simply be classified as true or false but must be seen as claiming only a greater or a lesser degree of probability and as always open to revision; (2) the principle of analogy, by which he meant that we are

> able to make judgements of probability only if we presuppose that our own present experience is not radically dissimilar to the experience of the past persons; and (3) the principle of correlation, by which he meant that the phenomena of man's historical life are so related and interdependent that no radical change can take place at any one point in the historical nexus without effecting a change in all that immediately surrounds it. Historical explanation, therefore, necessarily takes the form of understanding an event in terms of its antecedents and consequences, and no event can be isolated from its historically conditioned time and space."(14)

Troeltsch believed that these principles are incompatible with traditional Christian belief because anyone who based his historical enquiries upon them would necessarily be in conflict with orthodox Christian belief. The force of his arguement is seen if we apply his principle of analogy to the Christian claims of uniqueness and divinity for Jesus Christ, and in particular belief in the Resurrection. We have no analogy for resurrection, Troeltsch says, and therefore we have no way of assessing the probability of such an 'event'. Can we speak, then, of resurrection as historical event? Orthodox assertions about the 'miracle' of the Resurrection, for Troeltsch, are incompatible with the principle of analogy precisely because it is impossible to assess the degree of probability of such an assertion.

What are for orthodox Christian belief revelatory events, such as the Incarnation and the Resurrection, are in terms of Troeltsch's principles, precluded from the field of critical history. By definition, any event which is not analogous to other events in history, and which have a transcendant (or supranatural) quality about them are precluded from critical historical enquiry.

Van Harvey summarizes the difficulties inherent in Troeltsch's position:

> "Many theologians agree with Troeltsch that the principle of analogy is incompatible with Christian belief if one interprets it as he does. But they conclude from this not that Christian belief is untenable but that Troeltsch simply reflected the anti-supernaturalistic and positivist bias of the nineteenth century. Troeltsch's criticisms, they claim, are but a version of a naturalistic metaphysics in which the occurrence of genuinely unique events is precluded from the outset." (15)

The problem lies not in the principle of analogy as such, but in the presuppositions which give rise to Troeltsch's three principles of historical enquiry, and thus with the nature of historical thinking itself. The naturalistic assumptions which underlie Troeltsch's work have, in the view of Harvey, dominated New Testament criticism from D.F.Strauss to Rudolph Bultmann.

> "It is clear, for example, that Strauss' concept of myth is predicted on the view that 'all things are linked together by a chain of causes and effects, which suffers no interruption', just as Bultmann admits that 'the historical method includes the presupposition that history is a unity in the sense of a closed continuum of effects in which individual events are connected by the succession of cause and effect', a continuum that 'cannot be rent by the interference of supernatural, transcendent powers...'" (16)

The question which Richard R. Niebuhr asks in his book Resurrection and Historical Reason[17] is whether the metaphysical presuppositions of Strauss and Bultmann (and by implication Troeltsch) do not in fact destroy historical thinking. Historical thinking, argues Richard R. Niebuhr, requires openness to the unique and the novel in past events, and no historian can *a priori* rule out the possibility of such events. If, for example, the resurrection is a unique event, then it challenges the principle of analogy and cannot be conformed to it. In this sense, of course, the resurrection represents the problem of all historical thinking: namely, how to understand the genuinely unique.

There are striking similarities between the theoretical assumptions of nineteenth century historicism and nineteenth century sociology. For example, the positivistic element in Troeltsch's principle of *correlation* creates a model of history as a nexus of cause and effect; a continuum of causality; an organic whole. This model has its counterpart in the history of sociological theory. Emile Durkheim and A.R.Radcliffe-Brown for example, propounded a functionalist view of society based on the analogy of a physical organism. In this view, the study of a particular aspect of a society, such as kinship, had to be undertaken in the belief that the institution of kinship cannot be understood in isolation from other aspects of that society. Every aspect of society is part of the whole, and each aspect of society is interdependent.

Functionalism in sociological theory has undergone a great deal of modification, as have the underlying positivistic assumptions of the model. Major difficulties with the model in its early form are numerous. Because of the similarities between historicism and sociological theory, some of the difficulties in the latter are of a similar nature to those that can be discerned in the former.

One of the major problems relating to what we may term the 'organic model' is that it is a typical example of what Whitehead called the 'fallacy of misplaced concreteness'; the error of supposing that conceptual entities are 'real' in the sense that a physical organism is 'real'. When a sociologist or anthropologist is describing the structure and function of a society, he is not describing an entity called 'society' but is, on the basis of his theoretical assumptions, abstracting from his observations about the relationships between the individuals in the society in order to describe what happens as well as how or why it happens.

Troeltsch's principle of correlation, by which it is asserted that the phenomena of historical life are interdependent, and that no change can take place at one point in the historical nexus without effecting change in all that immediately surrounds it, is an example of the "fallacy of misplaced concreteness". It assumes that history is an 'entity', whereas the process of description and explanation of events by a particular historian of a given period of history is a process of abstraction which the historian does on the basis of his theoretical assumptions.

The principle of correlation which Troeltsch enunciated, is strikingly similar to Emile Durkheim's principle of <u>concomitant variation</u> which reflects the influence of nineteenth century positivism on his sociological theory. A statement of Durkheim's principle of concomitant variation, when applied to his classic study on suicide, would be: if a change in one variable (rate of suicide) is accompanied by change in another (religious affiliation) the two changes are probably casually related; either directly, or through a third variable. It should be noted that Durkheim's principle rests on two presuppositions: that there is a correlation of variables in a society; and that societies are not made up of random 'items', but of items which hang together

in a meaningful nexus.

The functionalist model in sociological theory and the principle of correlation in critical historicism lean heavily upon the organic analogy which is drawn from the biological sciences. they also reveal the pervasive influence of nineteenth-century positivism with its mechanistic view of the world. William Nicholls in his Systematic and Philosophical Theology characterises nineteenth-century science and the problems it presents for theology in this way:

> "Nineteenth-century tended to see the world on the model of a vast machine, and in this model, scientific laws were unbreakable. The regularity of the universe could not be infringed without destroying the basis of science, and rendering it once again unintelligible to the human mind. But since the regularity of nature was constantly being verified with every fresh experiment, and no new evidence of a convincing kind came in to support the occurrence of miracles, the scientists became extremely sure of their principle." (18)

Today the organic model is seriously questioned by sociological theorists although positivism still has a pervasive influence in the social sciences even though some of its extreme implications may have been abandoned. Evidence of this questioning is set out in John Rex's Key Problems of Sociological Theory. (19)

Present-day science also operates with a model which is less mechanistic. Nicholls writes:

> "The concept of unbreakable law, with its implications for a rigid causality operating throughout nature, is being replaced, if only to account for observations at the sub-atomic level, with a notion,, going back to Hume in its origins, of statistical regularity. Thus, the present-day scientist is more likely to speak of a high degree of probability of one event following upon another, than of the first causing the second...
>
> Whether a more contemporary understanding of scientific law makes miracle easier to incorporate into a scientifically-grounded picture of the world may... be doubted. At any rate, there is no agreement among the most influential of contemporary theologians that it does." (20)

Criticisms may be levelled at Troeltsch's principles of historicriticism, or against the functionalist model in sociological theory, in terms of the presuppositions which inform them.

But an important factor emerges which is in keeping with the modern critical spirit. This is the factor of autonomy. It is the insistence, for example of, sociological theorists from Durkheim and Radcliffe-Brown to the present, that sociological explanation is not reducible. That is to say, sociological explanation must be given in terms of sociological criteria, and cannot be given on the basis of psychological or historical or any other. This is not to say that the sociologist deliberately ignores insights from the disciplines of psychology or history. It is to insist, however, that sociological data must be interpreted sociologically.

The spirit of autonomy which drives sociological theorists constantly to refine and perfect their tools of research, is a characteristic of the scientific spirit. This jealously guarded spirit of autonomy is equally cherished in the other sciences of man, including critical history. This spirit of autonomy is based on the conviction, in critical history for example, that the truth of a particular historical judgement must be validated in terms of the critical tools of that particular discipline, and not by appeal to transcendent or suprarational authority. Thus, the truth or falsity of historical judgements, must be decided on the basis of the principles operative within the discipline of critical history itself, and not by reference to some external authority.

For our purposes, the important point to note is that the evolution of a critical historical method has important implications for theology. On the one hand, Niebuhr and so-called neo-orthodox theologies generally, respected the autonomy and critical nature of this discipline, and took its findings seriously. But the very act of doing this raised serious problems for Christian faith as we have seen in relation to Troeltsch's principle of analogy.

The force of Langdon Gilkey's criticism of neo-orthodoxy, with which we began this chapter, is evident at this point: "It attempted to accept the secular world <u>secularly</u>, but to retain the Biblical and orthodox worlds <u>religiously</u>." This dualistic posture, it must be noted, was to some extent a response to the evolving critical historical method. It is to that response we now turn.

(b) Neo-orthodoxy and Historical Criticism

Troeltsch's principles of historical judgement raised serious problems for Protestant theology. If it is true that the historian must assume the principle of analogy: that the way we experience the present is not radically dissimilar to the experience of past persons, what do we make of the Resurrection or the Incarnation which are fundamental to Christian faith? If the historian does not assume the principle of analogy, can he talk at all about the probability and improbability?

Consider Troeltsch's first principle: that our judgements about the past can be seen as having only a degree of probability, and as always open to revision; a principle which is surely essential to historical enquiry, but raises serious questions for Christian faith. Van Harvey argues that the emergence of the so-called neo-orthodox or dialectical school of theology was, in fact, a response to the problems raised by Troeltsch.

> "Barth, Brunner, Bultmann and Tillich argued, as Martin Kâhler and Sören Kierkegaard had done before them, that faith is a passion which becomes comic and distorted if it tries to rest on the 'approximation process' of historical inquiry. Faith has, they claimed, its own certitude, and it is a falsification of both faith and historical inquiry if the former is based on the latter: a falsification of faith because faith cannot change with every new consensus of New Testament criticism or hold its breath lest some discovery in the Dead Sea area casts a shadow of doubt over this or that particular belief; falsification of history because it is intolerable to honest inquiry if the New Testament critic or believer decides in favour of one historical judgement rather than another because it is more compatible with his religious beliefs. Consequently, the dialectical theologians argued that the object of faith is not the Jesus reconstructed by the historian but the Christ proclaimed in the kerygma, the one who was crucified and revealed to be the Word of God." (21)

Of course, it can be argued that historical inquiry can never prove that Jesus is the Christ, the Son of God. But, in principle at least, it can cast doubt on it. For what if historical inquiry proved beyond reasonable doubt that, for example, the actual words of Jesus were significantly different in content and meaning from those upheld by the Church?

The attempt by dialectical theology to separate faith from historical criticism, is itself liable to serious criticism. It is possible to claim as dialectical theology does in principle, that Christian faith rests on an interpretation of a concrete historical event, and at the same time to argue that no historical judgement can falsify that interpretation? A critic of dialectical theology can rightly argue that you cannot have historicity without encountering risk.

On the question of the relationship between faith and history, Van Harvey argues that the issue centres on "the collision of two moralities of knowledge, the one characteristic of the scholarly world since the Enlightenment, the other characteristic of traditional Christian belief." (22) The issue, for Harvey, "is not merely a problem of two logics or two methodologies. It is a problem... of two ethics of judgement." (23) In fact, he goes so far as to say that from "liberal Protestantism to the new hermeneutic, Protestant theology may be regarded as a series of salvage operations, attempts to show how one can still believe in Jesus Christ and not violate an ideal of intellectual integrity." (24)

These are serious charges upon the method of dialectical theology. Yet there is some warrant for them when one considers how some of these theologians sought to cope with the problems raised for them by historical inquiry. At this point it is important to stress that while the single term "dialectical theology" or "neo-orthodox theology" is used to describe a certaim group of theologians, there are, of course, significant differences between, say, Barth and Bultmann, or Tillich and Niebuhr. There is, as we have already shown in this essay, much that is common to all, and therefore justifies the use of a single descriptive term for them.

One such common feature is the insistence of dialectical theology that faith is something deeper than belief in a set of commonly held propositions. It is the theologians task, among others, to explore not only what we believe, but how we believe what we believe. And for those who were more attracted to existentialism, the important focus was on the authenticity of the <u>believer</u> in response to the Word of God.

To return to the charges made by Harvey against dialectical theology, it is necessary to look at the ways in which the problem of faith and history is highlighted in the work of specific theologians of this 'school'. We do this because it will help us to understand some of the problems which relate to Reinhold Niebuhr's understanding history. In doing this we rely on Harvey's analysis to point up the dilemmas.

Rudolf Bultmann's attempt to wrestle with the relationship of faith and history is equivocal. It is a major affirmation of the Christian faith, for Bultmann, that man can only realize his own true nature through the prior initiative of God. The act of God whereby man is enabled to live authentically, occurs in Jesus Christ and in the proclamation of this Word to man. However, this proclamation is not historical report which may or may not be verified by critical means; rather it proclaims

> "that in what happened then, however it might have been (es möge gewesen sein wie es wolle), God has acted, and that through this act of God the Word of divine judgement and forgiveness which now confronts him is authenticated. The meaning of that act of God is nothing other than the establishment of this Word - the proclamation of this Word itself. No historical science can control or confirm or reject this affirmation. For that this Word and this proclamation are God's act stands on the other side of historical observation." (25)

Thus, Bultmann argues that faith is a universal possibility for man, and also that faith is dependent upon an act of God in history about which little can be known. As Harvey points out, what is so perplexing about Bultmann's position is that it tends to support the contention that there is no relationship between faith and history. This contention can be stated this way: If faith can be translated into existentialist terms (as Bultmann insists it can), then it can be argued that reference to Jesus Christ is not necessary. ~~This, as we saw in our first chapter, is the logical conclusion which Shubert Ogden in fact reaches.~~ If, on the other hand, reference to Jesus Christ is necessary (as Bultmann insists it is), then how can faith be independent of historical inquiry?

We now turn to the manner in which Paul Tillich wrestled with the issue of faith and history. Essentially, Tillich wishes

to interpret the Protestant Reformer's understanding of justification by faith. Like Barth and Bultmann, he believes that this understanding of faith must be seen as the experience of grace and judgement "that brings assurance by depriving us of all security".(26) The Protestant message, furthermore, gives "witness to the 'New Being' through which alone it is able to say its word in power... without making this witness again the basis of a wrong security."(27) Thus, in this radical view of faith, man is able to accept the ambiguities of his existence, without resorting to false bastions of security which may take the form of a world-view or an absolute claim to truth.

In his Courage To Be Tillich speaks of an "absolute faith" which "transcends theism"; it is "the accepting of the acceptance without somebody or something that accepts"(28) it is the courage to be. In what way, then, is this "absolute faith" related to the Christ-event? In principle there is no essential connection, although Tillich believes it found perfect expression in Jesus Christ. The absolute faith of which Tillich speaks is, as Harvey puts it, "a possibility available to man as man, even a man who has never heard of Jesus of Nazareth. Indeed, if faith is not such a universal possibility, Tillich's thesis in Courage To Be is meaningless, since his basic point is to demonstrate how faith can appear when all traditional Christian belief and symbolism are rendered unintelligible. It is this radicalization of faith that constitutes Tillich's power as an apologetic theologian in our times, but it depends on his cutting any essential tie to Christian revelation." (29)

But Tillich does want to assert that Jesus is the Christ, and that assertion has to do with historical fact, and an interpretation of that fact. The historical fact of Jesus may be expressed symbolically, but if this "factual element in the Christian event were denied, the foundation of Christianity would be denied." (30) He also wants to assert that the picture of Jesus which the New Testament provides is the basic image or parable of faith, although he does not argue that revelation occurs only in Jesus. That revelation is final in the sense that it occurred perfectly in Jesus, but it presupposes "preliminary" and "adumbrated" revelations which occur elsewhere in human experience.

Once more, as Harvey shows, we are faced with ambiguities in the relationship between faith and history:

> "... it still remains a question how this historical revelation may be affirmed as essential to faith without prejudice to the universal possibility of faith on the one hand or without colliding with the morality of historical knowledge on the other. ... How is it possible to affirm that Jesus is the decisive event for faith while insisting that 'historical research can neither give or take away the foundation of the Christian faith'?" (31)

The difficulties which Harvey discerns in Tillich's standpoint he also explores in relation to the work of Karl Barth.(32) We shall have occasion to deal with them when we explore Reinhold Niebuhr's understanding of the relationship between faith and history.

At this point it should be noted that so-called neo-orthodox theology's response to critical history was an endeavour to separate faith and the discipline of historical criticism. In doing so it accepted the principles of autonomy and responsibility of that discipline. It also asked that the same respect be accorded to it in its exploration of the nature and structure of faith; its legitimate field of inquiry. Furthermore, as Harvey shows, some dialectical theologians - Gogarten and H. Richard Niebuhr in particular - argue that there is a structural affinity between their understanding of the faith and the scientific spirit.

> "Gogarten, for example, insisted that the autonomy and responsibility of the sciences, including history, were made possible by the Protestant concept of justification. H. Richard Niebuhr, on the other hand, was more cautious and was content to point out that the Protestant theologian will recognise that there is something like radical faith in the work of the secular communities of learning influenced by the enlightenment.
>
> Although it can be questioned whether Protestantism stands on a casual relationship to the autonomy exemplified by the modern scientific spirit, Gogarten's thesis is... that it was the unique contribution of the Protestant Reformation to shatter the Weltanschauung of the medieval world and, hence, to free the self for God, on the one hand, and for the world on the other. By this Gogarten means that the medieval vision of reality was bound to the static categories of classical Greek metaphysics. The actual world, according to this understanding, consists not so much in change, which is to say in history, but in

> certain unalterable and eternal structures. The will of God is that men conform to these eternal patterns; hence, history is thought to be fulfilled just to the degree that man takes his place within an already existing and eternal framework...
>
> Luther's message shattered this understanding, Gogarten argues. By means of his doctrine of the two kingdoms, Luther repudiated the medieval church's claims to sovereignty over the world and granted a new autonomy to man. Life in the world was entrusted to reason and to government; the salvation of the soul was a matter for God... the upshot of this distinction between the two realms was to grant complete independence to the sciences. In the name of faith, so to speak, science was free to do its own work."(33)

Whether in fact there is a casual relationship between Reformation thought and the scientific spirit, as Gogarten suggests, is an open question. If, however, Gogarten is right in his thesis that the Protestant era replaced the static categories of medieval thought with more dynamic ones, then this is a tremendous gain. But it is a gain that is not without ironical dimensions, in the sense in which Reinhold Niebuhr uses the notion of irony. For Niebuhr, an ironic situation pertains when virtue becomes vice through some hidden defect in the virtue, and the person involved in it bears some responsibility for that situation. If Gogarten's thesis is right, then there is obvious virtue in the autonomy achieved for the sciences when "in the name of faith, so to speak, science was free to do its own work". The hidden defect in the virtue is that in the name of that same faith, so to speak, a wedge is driven between faith and the sciences - including historical science. Then faith becomes a matter for the theologians, and science for the scientists, and the dualism which is inherent in dialectical theology becomes apparent. Or to put the matter another way, the secular world is accepted as secular at the same time as the Biblical world is accepted religiously.

The issues which have been raised in our discussion in this section, of the relationship between theology and history form the backdrop for an examination of Niebuhr's view of history. In some instances they come sharply into focus in such examination. To this we now turn.

(3) NIEBUHR'S VIEW OF HISTORY

(a) Introduction

Anyone who sets out to analyse Niebuhr's understanding of history is immediately confronted with two problems. The first is the sheer volume of his writing. What might be called his systematic treatment of history is contained in seven books. These are: Reflections on the End of an Era (1934), Beyond Tragedy (1937), The Nature and Destiny of Man (1943), Discerning the Signs of the Times (1946), Faith and History (1949), The Irony of American History (1952), and The Self in the Dramas of History (1955). But most of his writing, whether in books, or published in journals, have a bearing on the issue.

The second problem relating to an analysis of Niebuhr's understanding of history arises out of the first. It is a problem of methodology: how to marshall all the relevant data in order to give it fair treatment, whilst at the same time keeping it within manageable proportions.

The procedure we will adoptis to begin with a 'statement of purpose' which seeks to describe Niebuhr's intention in wrestling with the problems of faith and history. We shall then examine his description of the 'three contending views of history' which are predominant in Western culture: namely the Greek, the Biblical-Christian, and the modern view. The remainder of the chapter will discuss Niebuhr's view of past and contemporary history. Our exposition of history as past event will be based largely on Faith and History. History as contemporary event will expound his understanding of 'revelatory events', 'myth and symbol' and 'tragedy and irony in the drama of history'. Throughout we will attemp to be both descriptive and critical of Niebuhr's view of history.

(i) A STATEMENT OF PURPOSE

In order to give some focus to this section on Niebuhr's view of history, and accepting that a theologian's task is determined as much by his Sitz im leben as by his Sitz im Denken, we might formulate a statement of his purpose in the following way.

> Niebuhr saw it as his task to give depth to the critique of the philosophical and theological assumptions of the prevailing optimism of his day. But before he could do this, he had to distil a

> tradition from the romantic, Enlightenment, and nineteenth-century views with which earlier Christian tradition had been admixed. Thus he arrived at a moral tradition in which Hebrew prophetic and New Testament insights, Augustine, and the Reformers came to the fore. This tradition he called Christian Realism.
>
> This process of distillation, which not only made him the centre of controversy but was painful to Niebuhr himself, was undertaken to bring fresh impetus to social ethics and political decision-making in a period of history turbulent with new problems.

The purpose which we have set out above is itself a distillation from his writings: nowhere does Niebuhr state his purpose in these terms. However he may have stated his task, he certainly saw it against the backdrop of the contemporary crisis in Western civilization. His Sitz im Leben was a determining factor in his Sitz im Denken. A quick look at the titles of his amazing output of books and articles from 1916 onwards is sufficient confirmation of this (34)

Writing of the contemporary crisis as he saw it in 1949, Niebuhr gives further confirmation of the above view. "Our civilization has been engulfed in obvious and widespread political and social confusion since the second decade of this century. One world war has followed another; and the second conflagration has left the world in even deeper distress and less assurance for the future than the first. While Western civilization has been the centre and source of the world's disorders, the social confusion and political tumult have spread from this centre into the whole world." The most immediate cause of our distress, he continues, "could be defined as the inability and unwillingness of modern men and nations to re-establish community, or to reconstruct justice, under conditions which a technical civilization has created." (35)

Philosopher and historian, William Dray has shown that it is possible to bring considerable criticism to bear on Niebuhr's formal writing on faith and history.(36) However, this task is made a lot easier for Dray because he at no point takes into account the issues with which Niebuhr was grappling when he wrote those books. In retrospect, and with the aid of critical literary and philosophical tools, Dray is able to reveal many weaknesses in what he describes as Niebuhr's "attempt to 'interpret' history

from the standpoint of religious faith." Dray acknowledges that Niebuhr's concern is social ethics; "the working out of a Christian view of history is closely associated with the task of showing the relevance of religious faith to the problems of secular life - especially political ones; and he is probably as well known in America for his dour and radical comment on political affairs as for his theological scholarship." (37) But when it comes to his analysis and criticism of Niebuhr's work, he in fact treats it as though it bore no relation to that secular life; as an example of speculative history in the worst sense. Criticism Niebuhr did and can bear, but what he cannot bear is to be treated as though he were working in a vacuum.

This criticism of Dray's approach to Niebuhr is made to highlight a problem faced by anyone who wants to do justice to Niebuhr's thought. That problem is how to analyse his work, whilst at the same time giving equal weight to his situation and to this thought.

(ii) THREE CONTENDING VIEWS OF HISTORY

In his Faith and History Niebuhr argues that three contending views of history dominate Western culture, and that the prevailing modern understanding of history is both similar to, and different from the view found in classical idealism. He also seeks to show that the Biblical view of history is superior to both the classical and modern interpretations.

> "Western culture embodies three approaches toward the exing problem of the nature of human history: (1) The approach of Greek classicism which equated history with the world of nature and sought emancipation of man's changeless reason from this world of change; (2) the Biblical-Christian approach which found man's historic existence both meaningful and mysterious and which regarded the freedom of man, which distinguished history from nature, as the source of evil as well as good; (3) and the modern approach which regarded the historical development of man's power and freedom as the solution for every human perplexity and as the way of emancipation from every human evil." (38)

In order to understand the predicament of modern culture, Niebuhr argues that it is necessary to examine the relationship between these contending views of history. "For the dynamism of western culture was made possible by the triumph of the Biblical-Christian sense of history as a realm of meaning over the

ahistorical culture of classicism. The unanticipated disaster which followed upon this dynamism is, on the other hand, related to the triumph of the modern view of history over the Biblical-Christian. For the Christian view of life and history recognised the peril, as well as the creativity, of human freedom while the modern view had an uncritical confidence in the enlargement of human freedom." (p.16)

Niebuhr argues, much as Gogarten does, that the classical Greek view of the world found chiefly in the works of Plato, Aristotle and the Stoics, was rejected because of its static and cyclic understanding of history. This view is a "western and intellectual version of the universal type of ahistorical spirituality", of which "Brahmin and Budhistic mysticism are oriental and non-rational versions." (p.17) He does not, however, attribute the fact that this view is superceded to the work of the Reformers, as Gogarten does. Rather, he suggests that it is superceded because of its ahistorical nature, and because of the alternative offered by the Biblical-Christian view of history.

At the other end of the scale is the modern view of history "distinguished by its confidence, both in the growing power of reason and in its capacity, when rightly disciplined, to assure the development of every human power and virtue." (p3) The dominant note in this view is a "faith in history"; the notion of "a redemptive history." Evidence of this understanding, Niebuhr finds, abounds in a diverse group of thinkers including Leibnitz, Herder, Kant, Hegel, and J.S.Mill.(p.3)

This linear, developmental view of history is a post-Renaissance phenomenon, arising at a time when Western man was regaining a sense of confidence in his creative powers. This view of history actually traces its ancestry back to the insights of the Hewbrew prophetic tradition, though Niebuhr argues that it secularizes them. And in doing so it misunderstands them. In essence, the modern view is that history, which in classical Greek thought was regarded as cycles of growth and decay, is seen as the "realm of indeterminate growth" (p.77) In consequence of this view, "extravagent estimates of freedom" in which the possibilities, for example, of increasing control over nature, increasing physical well-being, the democratization of society, the creation of a universal community, and other legitimate goals will follow

inevitably.

Such a view of history, Niebuhr argues, is a vast improvement upon the classical view because it finds meaning in man's historical existence. But it also involves a disasterous naivete. It seriously overestimates extent of freedom in history, and plays down built-in limits to that freedom.

> "This modern creed has distilled a great illusion from an important truth. The truth is that both nature and historic institutions are subject to development in time. ...Modern culture... is unique in its recognitions of the full significance of historic development.
>
> The illusion which it derived from this truth was the belief that growth fulfilled the meaning of life, and redeemed it from its ills and errors."(p.78)

The overestimation of freedom, and the tendency to identify freedom with virtue, are the basis of this illusion. Niebuhr believes that the Christian view is protected against the naive assumptions of a progressive view of history in that it has a more realistic understanding of human nature. This understanding derives from the view that evil is no accidental or passing thing; it is located in the warp and woof of life of which the notions "original sin" and the "Fall" are symbols.

The outstanding achievement of the modern view of history is its "recognition of the full significance of historic development". This is due partly to its antecedents in the Hewbrew prophetic tradition, but also because history has been the scene of technical advances which have changed the way we view the world.

However, Niebuhr poses a problem in regard to the contribution of the Hebrew-Christian tradition to a dynamic understanding of history. "The truth about temporal development in nature was not known at all in classical thought;and the idea of historic development was not fully appreciated. It was recognized only obliquely in Christian thought, even though Biblical-Hebraic thought conceived of time as moving on a line rather than a cycle."(p.78) For this reason the modern view of history is a unique achievement, in his view.

Perhaps the reason why this dynamic, or developmental view was recognised only obliquely in Christian thought lies in the fact that, in spite of the thoroughgoing process of distillation

which Niebuhr embarked upon, he did not go far enough. Standing as it were "on the shoulders" of Niebuhr, Harvey Cox believes that the process which Niebuhr began must be continued. He writes:

> "If Niebuhr's accomplishment was to extricate and show the relevance of the Judaeo-Christian view of man for politics, our challenge is to extricate the characteristically Hebrew dimension of this tradition and to show how it informs an open and responsible view of the future...
>
> For the Hebrews... the world itself <u>was</u> history. God's word to man, his <u>dabar</u>, was a promise that directed man toward a future in which this promise would be fulfilled ...
>
> ... early Christianity was also extremely future oriented. But this open and expectant attitude toward the future in early Christianity was tempered by two influences. One was dualistic <u>apocalypticism</u>; the other was Greek teleology." (39)

Cox believes, therefore, that the process must be continued of refining and purifying a tradition that has become embellished with these additions, in order that the prophetic insights of Hebrew tradition can be brought to bear on our present political quandries. He believes this, because apocalypticism and teleology, with their inherent understandings of man and history, offer little help to us at this time.

To return to Niebuhr's analysis of the modern view of history, he argues that there is perhaps no limit which can be set to the potential extent of technological advance, and that contemporary history is evidence of that advance. But there is also mounting evidence "that the growth of human freedom and power enlarges the scope of human problems. The problems in their larger scope are not insoluble. Proximate solutions, at least, may be found for them in time." (p.110) Real power in history, in his view, lies at another point; a point at which the Christian understanding of man has a contribution to make. It is whether man can master his own "egoistic desires and impulses." For with every advance man makes in history, there is a wider range of possibilities both for good and evil, as he notes in this passage:

> "Every new freedom represented a new peril as well as a new promise. Modern industrial society dissolved ancient forms of political authoritarianism; but the tyrannies which grew on its soil proved more brutal and vexatious than the old ones. The inequalities rooted in landed property, were levelled. But the

> more dynamic inequalities of a technical society became more perilous to the community than the more static forms of uneven power. The achievement of individual liberty was one of the genuine advances of bourgeois society. But this society also created atomic individuals who, freed from the disciplines of the older organic communities, were lost in the mass and became the prey of demagogues and charlatans who transmuted their individual anxieties and resentments into collective political power of demonic fury." (pp.7,8)

The possibility that increasing "freedom over natural limitations might result in giving egoistic desires and impulses a wider range than they had under more primitive conditions seems never seriously to disturb the modern mind." (p.77) It is the more realistic view of man in the Biblical-Christian tradition, symbolized in the concept of "original sin", that Niebuhr believes is essential to off-set the naive optimism of the modern view. Against the stream of prevailing optimism, Niebuhr sought to re-interpret the doctrine of "original sin" that it might fit the role he saw to be so necessary in the contemporary situation. In Chapter Two we explored in some detail his understanding of this doctrine. Essentially it asserts "the obvious fact that all men are persistently inclined to regard themselves more highly and are more assiduously concerned with their own interests than any 'objective' view of their importance would warrant", and that this is true of individuals as it is of communities (40) Built in to the human condition is man's tendency to make of himself a "false centre of meaning"; to ascribe to himself the role of "creator" rather than "creature"; to be guilty of "idolatry" which in essence is "man's unwillingness to acknowledge his finiteness"(p.133) And Niebuhr during his life-time, used all his considerable polemical skills to make this point as forcefully as he could. For he believed that the consequences of a modern view of man and history, without the correctives of Biblical Realism, were sadly in evidence all around him. In "soft utopianism" with its creed of salvation through progress; and in "hard utopianism" with its secular faith in salvation through revolution, he saw with prophetic insight and passion the dangers of a disasterous naivete.

What then does Niebuhr assert is the Biblical-Christian understanding of history? Indirectly, of course, we have already examined some of its assertions by contrast to classical and

modern views of history, and in doing so have explored some of the issues with which he grappled during his life-time. We must now turn to an examination of the assertions he makes for the Biblical-Christian view of history.

There is no "Christian 'philosophy' which could be set against a modern or a classical one in such a way as to prove its superior profundity through rational comparison." (p.114) This is so because by its nature Christianity does not offer a rational philosophical system, and cannot do so because of its dependence on revelatory events which must be apprehended by faith. It may be possible, though, to demonstrate its relevance: to "prove its relevance rationally",(p.114)as he puts it.

What then does Biblical-Christian faith assert about history? In essence it asserts the sovereignty of God over the whole of it. Whilst it is true that the idea of a divine sovereignty over history is not unique to Biblical thought, "yet the Biblical concept of a divine sovereignty over individual and collective historical destiny has a unique quality." This quality is given by the fact that "the God who is operative in historical destiny is not conceived as a projection or extension of the nation's or individual's ideals and purposes, nor as a power co-extensive with, or supplementary to, the nation's power; nor as a force of reason identical with the Logos which the human mind incarnates."(p.115) God chooses Israel. Israel does not choose God; and initiative is His.

Belief in a transcendent, sovereign God is integral to the Biblical tradition This faith in a transcendent God "who is at once the creator of theworld (i.e. source of its meaning) and judge of the world (i.e. goal of its perfection)"(41)serves two important functions. History has a unity under the sovereignty of God: this article of faith is a safeguard against over simple systems for understanding history. Also, the inclination of every human collectivity to make itself the centre of history is overcome in principle by this emphasis upon divine, sovereign transcendence.

The Hebrew is able to make these assertions about God because of his understanding of revelation. The "radically new dimension" in the story of the Hebrew people, as Niebuhr sees it, lies in the fact that the God of this people is conceived not as <u>their</u> God,

but the God who singled them out for a special destiny.

> "The 'fact' of history by which they give meaning to their history is God's 'covenant' with Israel, in which, by a special act of divine grace, this people is singled out for a special mission. The particular event which becomes the centre of historical interpretation, from which history is finally interpreted backward to creation and forward to the Messianic reign, is the Sinaitic covenant." (p.27)

The idea that a universal history should have emerged from the "core" of this particular event is what Niebuhr calls the "scandal of particularity",(p.119) and is essential to the Biblical tradition. It is "a scandal for all rationalistic interpretations of history" because, according to these interpretations, "universally valid concepts of meaning must be found in recurrences and forms to which all historical phenomena conform."(p.118)

The "scandal of particularity" for Christian faith lies in the significance it finds in the Christ-event as revelation. Thus, Niebuhr writes:

> "The Christian faith begins with, and is founded upon, the affirmation that the life, death, and resurrection of Christ represents an event in history, in and through which a disclosure of the whole meaning of history occurs... The interpretation of history in the light of this event creates a structure of meaning in which the history of a particular nation, as the centre of the whole of history, is unequivocally transcended. This 'second covenant' between God and His people is not between God and any particular people but with all those of any nation who are 'called', that is, who are able to apprehend by faith, that this person, drama and event of history, discloses the power and the love which is the source and the end of the whole historical drama. In so far as this is an event, the revelatory depth and height of which must be apprehended by faith, it is not the basis of a 'philosophy of history' at which one might arrive by analysing the sequences and recurrences, the structures and patterns of history. But in so far as history becomes meaningful by being oriented toward the revelation of this event, the event is the source of 'wisdom' and of 'truth'. (pp.29,30)

In the above passage, which is crucial to his view of history, Niebuhr makes it clear that the Christ-event is <u>the</u> revelatory event which provides the basic clue for interpreting history. "The New Testament makes the startling claim that in Christ, history has achieved both its end and a new beginning." (p.157) Here he

makes a distinction between the "form" and "content" of this revelatory event.(p.158) The form is that of a story, an event in history which, by the apprehension of faith, becomes more than a mere story; it becomes the event through which meaning is given to the whole of history and the specific nature of divine sovereignty over history is revealed as "suffering love. As such it is a challenge to man's reason. The content of this revelatory event, the crucifixion of the Messiah, is a challenge to man's virtue. This is so because the agents of the crucifixion were the two highest achievements of human culture at the time - Roman law and Jewish religion. The suffering of the "guiltless one" becomes for Christian faith a "revelation of God's own suffering", and as such it brings a unique answer to bear on the perplexing problem of suffering itself. For, as Niebuhr puts it "to make suffering love rather than power the final expression of sovereignty was to embody the perplexity of history into the solution."(p.161)

This revelatory Christ-event has, in Niebuhr's understanding of history, both a positive and a negative function. Following Robert Fitch's analysis of Niebuhr,(42) the Christ-event has a positive function as a revelation of God's wisdom and truth, His grace and power. But what is perfectly revealed can only be imperfectly apprehended by man because of sin. In consequence of this, the justice we achieve can only be partial, tentative justice in history; the truth we apprehend is always obliquely known. Man is therefore an ambiguous creature in the position of simultaneously 'having and not having the truth'.

The negative function of the Christ-event as revelation is that this event always stands in judgement upon all the idolatrous centres of meaning before which we worship. These may be secular: feudal, bourgeois, or Marxist. They may be Christian: Lutheran, Catholic, Calvinist, or Pietist. In either case they reflect man's perennial disposition to create for himself false centres of meaning and thereby show their need for that ironic interpretation of evil in history, which Niebuhr believes to be normative for Christian faith. Such a view is based on the belief

> "that the whole drama of human history is under the scrutiny of a divine judge who laughs at human pretensions without being hostile to human aspirations. The laughter at the pretensions is the divine judgement. The judgement is transmuted into mercy

> if it results in abating the pretensions and in prompting men to a contrite recognition of the vanity of their imagination." (43)

How can we know that the Christ-event is not itself another idolatrous centre of meaning? Here Niebuhr calls our attention to what he describes as "the history of expectation". In the New Testament, the Christ-event is presented as the last in a series of God's mighty acts; the fulfillment of the promise of a Messiah. Thus Niebuhr argues

> "No Christ could validate himself as the disclosure of a hidden divine sovereignty over history or as a vindication of the meaningfulness of history, if a Christ were not expected... Any Christ must be 'foolishness to the Greeks', both ancient and modern. Christ may also be a'stumblingblock to the Jews'; but he is not 'foolishness' to them." (44)

Christ is"foolishness" to the Greeks precisely because they had no expectation of a Messiah: he is "stumbling block" to the Jews because, in spite of their history of expectation, he proves to be not the Messiah they expected.

This argument from the history of expectation raises some serious questions about the adequacy of Niebuhr's validation of the revelatory event. Standing within the Biblical tradition, he can argue that the Christ-event is the "last in a series of God's mighty acts". But he is singularly unwilling to deal with the continuity of history that follows rather than precedes this Act. Is he arguing that God does not, in fact, reveal himself in the events that follow? In terms of his formal theory it would appear so. For he argues that the final clue to understanding the mystery of divine power is to be found in the Christ-event, and that once this is apprehended by faith, all history can be interpreted in the light of this event and become the impetus to "renewal". Thus it would seem, Niebuhr is saying that the Christ-event, which occurred at a particular time in history, must be apprehended by faith in order that we might make sense of the present and the future in the light of that "clue".

> "That the final clue to the mystery of the divine power is found in the suffering love of a man on the Cross is not a proposition which follows logically from the observable facts of history. But there are no observable facts of history which cannot be interpreted in its light. When so interpreted the confusions and catastrophies of

> history may become the source of the renewal of life." (p.155)

If the Christ-event is seen as the last in a series of God's mighty acts, in what sense can we speak of God's action in contemporary history? Must we interpret "last" to mean final? Or is Niebuhr's use of the phrase "a series" to be taken to mean that history is still open to more acts of God? These are serious questions regarding Niebuhr's methodology. However, in keeping with what he has said about the Christ-event, we believe that by 'final' he means final in depth. This seems to be borne out by his use of the phrase "last in a series of God's mighty acts".

When raising similar questions about how Niebuhr sees divine providence in operation in history, William Dray discerns some likeness between Niebuhr, Toynbee, and Hegel:

> "The account Niebuhr elaborate(s) of the actual operation of divine providence in history is (like Toynbee's theory) in some ways reminiscent of the Hegalian dialectic. For Niebuhr's providence does not intervene miraculously; like Hegel's 'reason' it is immanent in the historical process itself. It is part of the providential 'structure of existence' that 'forms of life which make themselves into their own end' accomplish thereby their own 'ultimate self-destruction'(p.27) By a kind of divine nemesis, pride not only goes before a fall; it brings it about. There is thus a vaguely cyclic pattern in history after all: men and nations are constantly overreaching themselves and being brought low. Unlike the Hegalian dialectic, however, Niebuhr's tension between providence and a corrupt human freedom has no dynamic quality; there is no progress from synthesis to synthesis. The limiting power of providence explains not the direction history takes, but why history never gets anywhere at all."(45)

Niebuhr, of course, has argued that the Hebrew-Christian tradition cannot offer a systematic philosophy of history because of its dependence on revelation, and because its understanding of divine sovereignty, history has unity but no overall structure that can be elaborated by reason. It is therefore not a speculative history in the sense that Hegel's or Toynbee's works are.

Furthermore, Niebuhr would argue in response to Dray's analysis that history cannot be redemptive; it cannot be its own Christ. The Biblical affirmation of the ultimate character of sin in history asserts that history has no inbuilt order of

progress that must eventually squeeze out sin. By the same token man cannot be his own Christ; cannot ever become master of historical destiny. To deny man's sin and finitude, which such affirmation asserts, is to open the way for the sort of man-made soteriologies which have generated some of the most terrible fanaticisms history has known, exemplified in Nazism and Communism in our century (Ch V-Vl). This, for Niebuhr, is the danger of any notion of a "progress from synthesis to synthesis."

Even granting the impact and implications of Niebuhr's argument that history cannot be its own Christ, is Dray not correct in discerning a lack of dynamic quality in which "history never gets anywhere at all"? For Niebuhr does claim that whilst history provides "disclosures" of meaning, it cannot provide fulfillment of meaning. This claim, as Fitch says, has merit in that it "mediates between classical philosophies, which deny all meaning to the temporal and seek escape to the eternal, and modern philosophies, which expect total fulfillment in history. In one of Niebuhr's favourite metaphors, Man is a Moses who has glimpsed the promised land from afar, and who has made some progress toward it on this earth, but who will not enter into it in history. The end of his life is a _finis_, an abrupt termination of his career in this world, but it is not the _telos_, or true end, which takes him beyond history."(46)

In distinguishing between "disclosure" and "fulfillment", _finis_ and _telos_, Niebuhr is seeking to hold the important truth that _history_, as such, cannot be its own saviour. One may ask however: does fulfillment - _telos_ - have to be other-worldly? Is this a true interpretation of the Biblical view taken as a whole? If fulfillment is seen as a "this-worldly" possibility, that is, historical, does this necessarily make it secular? For Niebuhr seems to imply that the notion of this-worldly fulfillment precludes the affirmation of divine sovereignty. Perhaps the lack of dynamic quality in Niebuhr, which we have more than once highlighted in this essay, could be overcome if he were to grant the possibility - under God - of fulfillment _in_ history rather than beyond it. Perhaps we have an instance here of what Harvey Cox discerned in Niebuhr: that whilst he went a long way toward distilling the Biblical tradition from its admixtures, at this point he did not go far enough. Had Niebuhr relied more on the

eschatological insights of the Hebrew prophets than on the teleology of Greek philosophy, the position may have been different.

Of course, Niebuhr is not so credulous as to follow implicitly the Greek understanding in his interpretation of the Biblical-Christian view of the end of history. What we find is an amalgam of Hebrew eschatological and Greek teleological insights in his view. He sees, for example, no necessary contradiction between Biblical and modern views of history:

> "It is necessary to subject Christian interpretation of life and history to constant re-examination, in order to detect the errors which become compounded with its truth in various stages of history. In our own day... it is necessary to incorporate what is true in the modern discovery of a moving time and a development in history into the final truth of the Christian Gospel. There is nothing incompatible between a Biblical conception of a dynamic history and the modern view of historical development if the modern errors of regarding historical development as self-explanatory and of equating it with redemption are avoided."(pp.223,224)

In fact, Niebuhr goes on to argue that if the affinities between these two views are fully explored some of the errors of traditional statements of the Christian position can be corrected.

However, Niebuhr emphasizes that the "New Testament envisages a culmination of history which is not, literally speaking, within time-history. It looks forward to a final judgement and a general resurrection which are at once both the fulfillment and the end of history. They imply an end in the senses of <u>finis</u>; but the end in the sense of <u>telos</u>, that is as the moral and spiritual culmination of the meaning is not within history itself".(p.267) The interpretation of "judgement" and "general resurrection" is highly symbolic but necessary for Christian faith if false centres of meaning are to be avoided.

> "These eschatological expectations in New Testament faith, however embarrasing when taken literally, are necessary for a Christian interpretation of history. If they are sacrificed, the meaning of history is confused by the introduction of false centres of meaning, taken from the contingent stuff of the historical process..."(p.243)

Dray's contention is that, on analysis, Niebuhr's view of history would seem to imply that "history never gets anywhere at

all." Niebuhr's notion of a *finis* in history, and a *telos* beyond history would seem to support this view. This may well be due to the fact that he appears to rely more on an admixture of the apocalyptic and teleological strains in the Biblical-Christian tradition than he does on the escatological. If Niebuhr had, in fact, explored the affinities he discerns in the Biblical conception of a dynamic history and the modern view of historical development he may have found it necessary to modify his position at this point. For as Harvey Cox notes, we inherit from Christianity three different, even contradictory, ways of perceiving the future:

> "The *apocalyptic*, deriving from ancient near Eastern dualism, forsees immanent catastrophe, produces a negative evaluation of this world, and often believes in an elite which will be snatched from the inferno when everything else dissolves. ***Teleology*** derived mainly from the Greeks but adapted by Christianity, sees the future as the unwinding of a purpose inherent in the universe itself or in its primal stuff, the development of the world toward a fixed end. The *prophetic* is the characteristically Hebrew notion of the future as the open field of human hope and responsibility. The Israelite prophets... recalled Yahweh's promise as a way of calling the Israelites into moral action in the present."(47)

Before concluding this section we must return to another problem raised by Niebuhr's concept of the "history of expectation". In what sense can Christians speak of Christ as universal, if the Christ-event can only be apprehended from within a tradition in which a Christ is expected? Where does this leave the "Gentiles" for whom Christ is "foolishness" precisely because they have no such history of expectation of a Christ? The problem of the validation of the revelatory event is, as we have seen throughout this essay, one that haunts Niebuhr; as it does contemporary theology in general. Niebuhr's answer appears to beg the question. For he argues, on the one hand, that the truth of the Gospel is not proved by rational analysis but is apprehended by faith; though it may be possible to prove its *relevance* rationally. More recently, as Fitch shows, Niebuhr has developed the doctrine that the real proof of the truth of the Gospel lies in the witness of a Christian life which shows the fruits of the Spirit. For at this point we are dealing with "a truth of faith; and it is validated by a witness of lives which have been obviously

remade by the power of God's judgement and forgiveness."(48) One may ask, however, in whose eyes are men obviously remade by God? Is this not an instance of reverting to a form of mysticism in the face of a hard question?

On the other hand, Niebuhr argues that history itself validates the viewpoint which must be apprehended by faith. For example, he argues that if a historic institution prospers this is evidence of God's grace in the creativities of history: if it fails this is evidence of God's judgement upon it:

> "the world's many cultures and civilizations... die in the end; but they also live. Their life is a testimony of the creativity of history, even as their death is a proof of the sin in history. The vast variety of historic organisms, the richness of their elaborations of human potentialities, the wealth of their many cultural forms and social configurations, are as certainly a testimony to the divine providence under which they have grown, as their destruction is a vindication of the eternal judgement, which they are unable to defy with impunity."(49)

But, the critic may ask, has not Niebuhr placed himself in an invulnerable position by his form of argument? Built into his understanding of providence is a defence against its overthrow. If you point to good in history, this is seen as validating his concept of providence; if you point to evil in history, this is also a vindication of that same providence. As William Dray says, "such a theory may still... tell us the truth about history. But it is hard to see how it can claim to be validated by the facts of history to which it appeals."(50)

The question at issue here has to do with the logical nature of religious language, as Dray recognizes. He is asking whether Niebuhr would allow the possibility of anything refuting his basic assertion about providence. Niebuhr himself does not answer this, except in the manner already stated. However, when discussing the prophetic method in regard to history in Chapter One, we made the point that the Hebrew prophet operated within a tradition, as Niebuhr does, which had a fixed point - the transcendant God who entered Covenant with Israel. Thus the prophet and his hearers operated within the same tradition. How else could they be heard except this were so? For this reason the prophet could allow nothing to refute his basic assertion that God is at work

in history without stepping out of the tradition in which this assertion is made. This is not to say, however, that his pre-supposition is not tested; it is tested on the anvil of experience in the history of Israel which validates or modifies it.

The questions we have raised in relation to Niebuhr's understanding of the "history of expectation" would seem to suggest that some modifications to Niebuhr's approach are required, if as we believe, an exposition of theology's relation to history must satisfy the requirement of validation. We will return to this question in the next chapter.

We have sought here to give a critical exposition of what might be called Niebuhr's formal approach to the problem of faith and history. We turn now to a discussion of his understanding of history as 'past event'.

(b) History as "Past Event"

For the purpose of clarity we make a distinction between history as "past event" and history as "contemporary event". Obviously, in general usage the word history denotes past event. The distinction, with reference to Niebuhr's understanding of history, is made in order that we might examine how he saw Biblical history (past) before we examine how he operated in history (contemporary). We do this for the purpose of discussion, although in practise there is a relationship between the two. We have some justification for this view if we interpret his Christian Realism thus: "Christian" meaning an understanding of the Hebrew-Christian tradition; and "Realism" meaning the reality of present experience. For it is clear that he wants to assert a dynamic relationship between these two parts of our total experience: even if he does not always succeed in doing so.

The two dominant motifs of the Biblical tradition, for Niebuhr, are the Exodus-event and the Christ-event.(p.27,29,30) Their significance lies in the fact that they are the pre-eminent revelatory events; that from the core of these particular events in history meaning is given to all history, and the specific nature of divine sovereignty is disclosed. In the Hebrew-Biblical tradition the Exodus-event signifies God's 'covenant nature' in that, by an act of grace, a particular people are chosen for a

special mission. This focal event becomes the disclosure of God's nature and activity from which all history is interpreted "backward to creation and forward to the Messianic reign." This "scandal of particularity" (einmaligheid) is a necessary part of revelation;

> "The mysterious divine power, which explains the beginning, the present order and the final end of history, represents a depth of mystery and meaning which is not fully disclosed by the obvious coherences of nature and sequences of history. Yet Biblical faith is not identical with agnosticism. It believes that God does disclose his purposes. The disclosure takes place in significant events of history. The revelatory power of these events must be apprehended by faith. So apprehended... they are 'mighty acts' of God in which the meaning of the whole drama of human life is made clear. This clarification is always an act of redemption as well as revelation."(p.119)

The Exodus-event as it is perceived in the Hebrew-Biblical tradition represents "the radical break of Biblical faith with the idolatrous tendencies in all human culture."(p.116) This is so because "God is not made in any human image" as is evidenced in the rigorous strictures placed on the making of images in the decalogue. Thus the mystery of God as Deus Absconditus is preserved: God and his purpose in history cannot be reduced too simply to "rational intelligibility... and thereby... given a false centre of meaning in a relative or contingent historical force or end." God is not the conception of a human mind or culture: he remains "mystery". But because of this understanding of the Exodus-event some meaning is given to this "mystery": God is perceived in that event. We use the word 'perceived' in its strict meaning here. The Exodus-event was an event located in a particular time and place; in the experience of a particular people. The significance of that event, in the Hebrew-Biblical tradition, lies in its revelatory character. In fact Niebuhr argues that the idea of God choosing Israel as an act of grace "represents a radical break in the history of culture. It is, in a genuine sense, the beginning of revelation."(p.117)

It is a bold claim to make for the Exodus-event that it was the beginning of revelation". Niebuhr's argument is

> "... here a nation apprehends and is apprehended by the true God and not by a divine creature of

> its own contrivance. The proof of the genuineness of His majesty and the truth of His Divinity is attested by the fact that He confronts the nation and the individual as the limit, and not the extension, of its own power and purpose. He is the enemy and the judge of every human pretension which transgresses the limits of human finiteness." (p.117)

We have some difficulties with Niebuhr's argument at this point. The first relates to his use of the word "beginning". Is he using this word in a highly symbolic way to mean "most important" or "most profound" in the sense that the Exodus-event was, for the Hebrew, basic to his understanding of God? There is some evidence that he is using it in this sense because he emphasizes that the prophetic role, of the Second Isaiah and Amos in particular, was to "interpret and reinterpret" the significance of the Sinaitic covenant. Every "profound prophetic interpretation of God's covenant with Israel leads to an indictment that Israel has broken the covenant and that it must turn from its evil ways if it would live. The dialectical fact that the special destiny of a nation exposes it to a special peril of pride and that capitulation to this temptation subjects Israel to a uniquely severe divine condemnation ... (is a) logic normative for the whole Biblical interpretation of history." (pp. 119,120) Thus Niebuhr does argue that the Exodus-event is the central motif of the Hebrew-Biblical tradition.

If, on the other hand, Niebuhr is using the word "beginning" in its usual sense of 'to start' or 'to commence', then surely the Exodus-event cannot be the beginning of revelation. For without the prior assumption that God reveals himself in history, there would be no Exodus-event. The revelatory significance ascribed to the historical events of the Exodus, by Moses and by the prophets later, is possible only if that assumption is granted. Niebuhr argues that the prophets did not "invent" the idea of a covenant God; neither did those who were involved in the dramatic events of the Exodus itself. Before Moses and the prophets, was Abraham, Isaac, and Jacob - all of whom stood in the same tradition; a tradition whose presupposition (albeit tentative) was that God reveals himself in the events of history and in the experiences of men. Of the depth and significance of the Exodus-event as revelation for the Hebrew-Biblical tradition there can

be no doubt. It represents, as Niebuhr says, a radical break in the history of culture. For it is on the basis of this event, and the theology of election implicit in it, that the Hebrew understanding of the meaningfulness of history is deduced. The outstanding achievement of this "completely unique and revolutionary doctrine" is, as G. Ernest Wright has argued, that it is the source of our modern conception of history in the Western World.(51) Liberal idealism and Marxism are secularized versions of the Biblical conception of history, and as such owe their genesis to this view.

As Wright says, the effect of Israel's theology of election is our modern conception of history. This is the conclusion which Niebuhr draws from his analysis:

> "Two ideas, basic to a Biblical interpretation of history are implicit in this radical conception of the relation of God to historical destiny. One is the idea of a universal history. The other is that history is filled with man's proud and pretentious efforts to defy the divine sovereignty, to establish himself as god by his power or virtue, his wisdom or foresight."(p.118)

He also contends that when this biblical interpretation of history is secularized, as for example in liberal idealism and in Marxism, it lends itself to the dangers inherent in "soft" or "hard" utopianism.

The Exodus-event is, Niebuhr argues, focal to the Biblical interpretation of history for the reasons already given. But to speak of it as the "beginning of revelation" is misleading because the revelatory significance of the events of the Exodus could only have been discerned on the prior assumption that God reveals himself in this way. This raises questions about Niebuhr's understanding of revelation and the validation of revelatory events. To return to a passage already used, he argues that the Sinaitic covenant is the beginning of revelation: for here a nation apprehends and is apprehended by the true God and not by a god of its own contrivance. The proof of the "genuineness" of His Majesty and the truth of His Divinity is attested by the fact that He confronts the nation and the individual as the limit, and not the extension, of its own power and purpose."(p.117) We have difficulty with his use of words like "proof" and "attested" in this regard. What Niebuhr appears to be doing is to use a

quality of transcendence to validate transcendence. He is saying transcendence (Majesty and Divinity) is attested by a quality of transcendence (He is not the extension of the nation's power). By definition the transcendent God cannot be the extension of a nation's power; one cannot therefore argue that the fact that God is not such an "extension" is proof of His transcendence. This surely is what is meant by the word 'transcendent'. And it is precisely this conception of transcendence, deduced from the Exodus-event in particular, that is the outstanding achievement of the Hebrew-Biblical tradition. One may argue that the insights gained from such an understanding of history are relevant to the human situation, as Niebuhr does with convincing force. We shall have occasion to return to the question of how revelatory events are validated.

Niebuhr acknowledges his indebtedness to his brother Richard for his understanding of revelation. According to June Bingham, "Niebuhr tells his classes he prefers his brother Richard's definition to any of his own. Richard Niebuhr has written in The Meaning of Revelation:

> By revelation in our history, then, we mean that special occasion which provides us with an image by means of which all the occasions of personal and common life become intelligible."(52)

That this is how he understands revelation is clear from his exposition of the Sinaitic covenant. For Niebuhr, however, the "special Occasion" which is the revelatory event is the Christ-event. This is not to say that it is the only event of revelatory significance, but that it is his leitmotif:

> "In so far as these various confrontations between God and His people have a history, there is also a history of revelation. But this is not a history of a broadening religious consciousness or of a more and more successful yearning or searching after God. For every step in the story requires that divine judgement be accepted in repentance...; and that the divine mercy which prompts and qualifies the judgement be apprehended by faith.
>
> The climax of the crucifixion and resurrection thus becomes not merely the culmination of the whole series of revelations but the pattern of all subsequent confrontations between God and man. They must contain the crucifixion of self-abandonment and the resurrection of self-recovery."(p.168)

In reply to Paul Lehmann's article on his Christology in the Living Library Volume, Niebuhr tells why Christology became central for him:

> "The situation is that I have come gradually to realize that it is possible to look at the human situation without illusion and without despair only from the standpoint of the Christ-revelation. It has come to be more and more the ultimate truth... Thus the Christological center of my thought has become more explicit and more important. But, as Professor Lehmann declares, I have never pretended to be a theologian, and so I have elaborated the Christological theme only in the context of inquiries about human nature and human destiny."(53)

It is in his volume Faith and History that Niebuhr gives his most explicit statement of his Christology. It is instructive for an understanding of his methodology to note his movement of thought in his treatment of the Christ-revelation. For, in that volume, his thought moves creatively from an analysis of the cultural, social, and political relevance of the Incarnation and the Atonement to an exposition and demonstration of the truth embodied in these 'doctrines' of Christian faith. Whilst insisting that the truth of Christian faith, cannot ultimately be demonstrated rationally, and must be apprehended by faith, this relationship between relevance and truth is intrinsic to his method. This, on his own admission, is the purpose of his Christology. For Niebuhr is on record as saying that his theology is intended to be nothing more than the analysis of the truth about Christus pro nobis and Christus in nobis in its significance for man. (54) This fact, unearthed by Lehmann, provides him with the key for his analysis of Niebuhr's Christology; and enables him to say of it - "Niebuhr's account of Jesus Christ is the presupposition of his anthropology."(55) This statement from Lehmann is not a very good one because if one takes a developmental view of Niebuhr's thought it is clear that there is an interplay between anthropology and christology in his thought. Lehmann's own analysis of Niebuhr's Christology makes this clear.

We have already noted the weight Niebuhr gives to the Christ-event as that event in history which for the Christian faith "represents... a disclosure of the whole meaning of history"(p.29) His analysis of the human situation (what Lehmann calls his anthropology) is an attempt to show the relevance of this

understanding of the Christ-event, and thereby to indicate the truth of this affirmation. We list here some of the conclusions he draws, for the contemporary situation, from his understanding of the Cross: so central in his view.

(1) The crucifixion represents a challenge to man's virtue: virtue here means man's capacity to make of his finest achievements "false absolutes". The Cross challenges this because the agents of the crucifixion were the two finest achievements of culture at that time: Roman law and Jewish religion.

(2) The Cross symbolises the fact that history is morally ambiguous to the end. This is so because the "perfect love which His life and death exemplify is defeated, rather than triumphant, in the actual course of history". The perfect love of Christ "is both the ultimate possibility of all historic virtues and a contradiction to them." (p.153) Proximate justice is all we can hope for in history since perfect justice is only possible when it culminates in self-giving love signified in the Cross. In reality (history) this is not possible because every striving toward justice has within it elements which contradict such self-giving; a fact which the Cross attests.

(3) The suffering of the "guiltless one" on the Cross is a revelation of "God's own suffering"; as such the final clue to the mystery of divine power is given. Therefore, the Christian faith does not promise to o ercome the fragmentary nature of man's existence; it does claim that this revelation of divine suffering "bears and overcomes the sins of the world". Divine power and mercy "ultimately resolve(s) life's ambiguities and purge(s) men of the evil into which they fall because they seek so desperately to overcome them."(pp.161,154)

(4) The Cross, therefore, represents the negation of man's attempts at salvation by his own wisdom, power, and virtue; whilst at the same time representing the promise of salvation. "New life is possible by dying to self... the Christian faith promises indeterminate renewals of life in history But on the other hand the total historical enterprise is not progressively emancipated from evil.(p.154) Niebuhr's criticism of "soft" and "hard" utopianism is made on the basis of this iew.

(5) The transcendent agape symbolized in the Cross ha a threefold relation to the ethical realities of history (56) (a) It "completes the incompleteness of mutual love (eros)". This is so because prudence will dictate that the relationship of one person to another has within it a

> measure of self-interest: and thus "inevitably arrest the impulse towards, and concern for, the life of the other." There are no limits in history for the achievement of more perfect mutual relations; in fact agape has been the impulse for every significant advance in this regard. But ultimately agape as sacrificial love is impossible of achievement in history. For example, "there is no limit to the possible admixture of forgiving love in criminal justice, except of course the absolute limit that no society will ever deal with criminals in terms of pure forgiveness or achieve a perfect relation between justice and forgiveness."
>
> (b) The Cross represents a "transcendent perfection which clarifies the obscurities of history" and "defines the limits of what is possible in historical development." This because every effort to translate this norm into reality falls into the error of making it a too "simple possibility". It is not possible to blur the distinction between mutual love (eros) and disinterested, sacrificing love (agape) in history. Attempts to do this, for example, by pinning hope on the cumulative effect of universal education (as in secular liberalism) or by revolutionary reorganization of society (as in Marxism), attest this fact.
>
> (c) In ethical terms the Cross stands in contradiction to all efforts to achieve a final goodness in history; for at best this goodness is a compound of self-assertion and eros - in the sense of mutual love. This is so because every community must be organized from a centre of power; and that centre of power is both impartial in its concern for the interests of others whilst at the same time being itself a partial social force. Writing at the end of the Second World War, Niebuhr attests this fact by predicting that this "tragic aspect of history will be illumined anew when the world powers which have defeated tyranny seek to organize the community of nations... Recognition of this aspect of history has the distinction of being a unique Christian insight".

The weight which Niebuhr gives to the Cross in his interpretation of the Christ event, and the profound insights which he draws from his understanding of the Cross in relation to the contemporary situation, are commonly acknowledged to be among his greatest achievements. In an article entitled "Theology and the Transformation of Society", Richard Shaull of Princeton Theological Seminary acknowledges the indebtedness of American theology to Niebuhr:

> "By the depth and brilliance of his work ... Niebuhr made an outstanding contribution to the development of theology in this country, and those of us who are concerned about the church's witness in society are indebted to him for this, and will always remain in his debt. But we have now reached a point where something more is demanded of us than a continued recognition of this indebtedness and further work along the lines he has set down. The present state of near sterility in Christian social thought may be a sign that this effort at some point went wrong theologically." (57)

Shaull goes on to suggest that the error lies in Niebuhr's employment of "metaphysical categories of transcendence" which describe God as one who stands over against history, whilst not being detached from it; and his "reduction of the biblical story to a theological anthropology" which views man as created in the image of God and a sinner. Such categories, Shaull argues, have little meaning for those affected by the advancing process of secularization. The "fundamental theological shift" which Shaull offers as an alternative is "a theology of messianism" and the "substitution of historical-eschatological" categories of transcendence for the "metaphysical-ontological imagery used by Niebuhr." (58) To this criticism, two rejoinders may be given. If the problem is one of communicating with those involved, in the process of secularization, is the problem going to be solved by replacing one set of transcendent categories with another: even granting his categorization of Niebuhr's thought? The other rejoinder is that, given the situation in which Niebuhr worked and his concern to make the truth of the faith relevant to that situation, it is understandable that the dominant motifs of his anthropology should be the "image of God in man" and "man as sinner," as Shaull himself is saying.

The real issue lies however not so much in the use of transcendent categories, but at another point. Assuming the gains made by Nieb hr's contribution to our understanding of man's nature and destiny: that it is possible for Shaull and others to stand, as it were, on his shoulders. And assuming the questions with which this essay begins: which ask whether we can deduce from the faith courses of social action by which we may act responsibly in the face of the seemingly unlimited possibilities of these last decades of the twentieth-century. These assumptions granted, we may well want to modify the weight which Niebuhr

gives to the Cross, and the somewhat pessimistic conclusion he draws from it that history is morally ambiguous to the end. This is the problem which Alves discerns in Niebuhr's understanding of the Cross. At the beginning of this chapter we noted Alves's question as to whether Niebuhr's view does not lead to the absolutization or justification of suffering, or the announcement of the final triumph of the ambiguities of history... (and asks) if the cross provides not a direction but a relativization of all directions, how is it possible to behave in order to bring about a new tomorrow?

Given Niebuhr's Sitz im Leben and the issues with which he grappled, his interpretation of the Cross nevertheless does invite criticism of the sort Alves makes. Perhaps the problem lies in the discernible imbalance in his treatment of the Cross and of the Resurrection. For if his interpretation of the Cross is long and penetrating, his analysis of the Resurrection is short and hedged about with problems.

Niebuhr deals with the Resurrection "event" in two pages of his Faith and History, although references to the significance of the Resurrection are to be found in the final chapter of the book: "The Church and the End of History". Because of the problems which arise in the manner of his dealing with the Resurrection "event", we will quote extensively from the two pages referred to. He writes:

> "While all Gospel narratives are written in the consciousness of the revelatory significance of the story they tell, the sense of the dimension of the story influences the telling of the narrative particularly in the accounts of the resurrection of Christ. It seems fairly certain that the earlier narratives reported an experience of communion by the disciples with the resurrected Lord in Galilee (1 Corinthians 15:1-8), while later narratives not only fixed this event at Jerusalem but sought to validate it by factual details of which the empty tomb was the most significant. The story of this triumph over death is thus shrouded in a mystery which places it in a different order of history than the story of the crucifixion. Yet the church as a fellowship of believers was obviously founded upon the conviction of the fact of the resurrection. This 'fact' contained an alteration in the story through faith's apprehension of the significance of the story. To recognize that the Cross was something more than a noble tragedy and its victim something else than a good man who died for his

> ideals; to behold rather that this suffering was indicative of God's triumph over evil ...; to see in other words the whole mystery of God's mercy disclosed is to know that the crucified Lord had triumphed over death ... It is the revelatory depth of the fact which is the primary concern of faith.
>
> The effort to certify this triumph through specific historical details may well be regarded as an expression of a scepticism which runs through the whole history of Christianity. The account of Christ's virgin birth serves the same purpose. Christ cannot be known as the revelation of God except by faith and repentance; but a faith, not quite sure of itself always hopes to suppress its scepticism by establishing the revelatory depth of a fact through its miraculous character. This type of miracle is in opposition to true faith.
>
> On the other hand the belief in the resurrection is itself a miracle of a different order, and a miracle without which the church could not have come into existence or could not continue to exist. It is the miracle of recognizing the triumph of God's sovereignty in what seems to be very ambiguous facts of history." (pp. 166, 167)

We confess some difficulty in understanding Niebuhr's argument. What he appears to be saying is this. The crucifixion is an event in history. (p.158) Presumably this means that it can be attested by critical historical methods. The interpretation of that event by the early church is dependent upon presuppositions about the revelatory significance of the story they are telling. Those presuppositions, presumably, include their understanding of revelation based upon the Exodus-event, and in what Niebuhr calls the "history of expectation". That is, the revelatory significance of the Cross depends on the presuppositions about revelatory events held by the Gospel writers. Thus the event becomes more than a mere event. It is interpreted as that event through which meaning is given to the whole of history and the specific nature of divine sovereignty over history is revealed as "suffering love". (p.29)

The Resurrection is in a "different order of history than the story of the crucifixion." The historical fact (in the same sense that the crucifixion is historical fact) is the "experience of communion ... with the resurrected Lord in Galilee" and reported in the Gospel narratives. Replying to a critic, in the Living Library Volume, Niebuhr confirms this view:

> "My impression was that historical scholarship seemed to indicate that the story of the empty tomb was an afterthought and that the really attested historical fact was the experience of the risen Christ among his various disciples. I accept that fact together with the certainty

> that the Church was founded upon the assurance that Christ was indeed risen." (59)

Through faith's apprehension of the revelatory significance of the story being told, the actual writing of the story is influenced and the narrative altered to include the empty tomb.

Thus Niebuhr's argument seems to be that revelatory significance is ascribed to the crucifixion: an event in history, on the basis of faith's presuppositions. This is in keeping with Niebuhr's understanding of revelation, to which we have referred in this chapter. No 'miracle' is needed to certify this understanding of the crucifixion. In the resurrection narrative, however, faith's presuppositions not only ascribe such revelatory significance (i.e. the experience of communion with the risen Lord) but require that the narrative be changed to accord with the revelatory significance. This he describes as "the effort to certify this triumph (the resurrection) through specific historical details" by a faith which, because it is unsure of itself, seeks to "suppress its scepticism by establishing the revelatory depth of a fact through its miraculous character".

Niebuhr is not saying of the resurrection - the story of this triumph over death "shrouded in a mystery" - that nothing happened. Something did happen, in the sense in which we normally use the word 'happen', as the experience of the disciples testifies. What did not happen, in this sense, is the 'event' of the empty tomb. What Niebuhr speaks of as "factual details" and "specific historical details" like the empty tomb, are to him nothing of the sort. They are the inventions of a "faith not sure of itself" designed to establish the "revelatory depth" of whatever did happen. The real miracle - "miracle of a different order" - is precisely the recognition of the revelatory depth of whatever did happen; i.e. the experience of communion.

It is difficult to avoid the conclusion that Niebuhr, in his discussion of the resurrection, is involved in a torturous logic which is out of keeping with the rest of his book. He appears to be embroiled in the same difficulties which we discussed in our section of "Neo-orthodoxy and Historical Criticism", which call forth from him concessions to a scientific world view.

One may ask: how does historical scholarship conclude that the empty tomb is an "afterthought"? There is no independent evidence to corroborate these so-called "alterations" to the

narrative. All the evidence we have is in these same narratives. Niebuhr argues that the Gospel writers made these embellishments to the story because they discerned the revelatory significance of the story they were writing. But they do not say this; Niebuhr does. The answer surely is that historical scholarship, with which Niebuhr concurs, can conclude that the empty tomb is an afterthought on the basis of its presupposition that such an event could not possibly happen. That is, because its principle of analogy of past with present argues that we can only make judgements about the probability that something happened only if we presuppose that our own present experience is not radically dissimilar to the experience of past persons. But we have no analogy, so the argument runs, for a bodily resurrection and the empty tomb. Therefore the probability of such an 'event' must be doubted. "We have difficulty with the physical resurrection of Christ", writes Niebuhr, because "we do not believe... that revelatory events validate themselves by a divine breakthrough in the natural order;" "we have given up one kind of miracle, and miracle is the dearest child of faith."(60) This he does on the basis of his presupposition of a "quasi-autonomous nature, created by God, not maintained by His fiat from moment to moment."(61) We shall have occasion to return to the problems raised here in our next chapter.

To return to Niebuhr's exposition of the Resurrection. Why, we may ask, does he dispense with the Virgin Birth which he says does not validate the revelatory truth of the Christ-event, and yet retain the Resurrection: albeit embellished with non-objective "detail"? If as he argues a faith unsure of itself certifies 'events' by miraculous means, why not retain both? Or, why not be consistent and dispense with the Resurrection as well? What criteria is he using for deciding to retain the Resurrection? Is it because he is convinced that the only <u>hard</u> fact in the resurrection narratives is the "experience of communion" with the Risen Lord reported there? If this is the case, on what basis does he accept the trustworthiness of the narrative at one point (the "experience of communion") and at another point reject the trustworthiness of the narratives ("details" about the empty tomb)? But the question is even deeper, as Ronald Hepburn shows:

> "Putting it generously, Niebuhr has yet to show us that we are justified in believing that the New

> Testament writers interpreted whatever events there were along sound lines, and did not distort or warp them. This trustworthiness is assumed and not argued for..." (62)

Does the answer to these questions not lie in that fact that Niebuhr is bringing to the resurrection narratives his own presuppositions, which include the rejection of 'miracle' in the sense of divine intervention in the natural order? For he appears to interpret the resurrection on the basis of this presupposition. Is he not, then, doing precisely what he suggests the Gospel writers did? For he suggests that on the basis of their presuppositions, which include the possibility of 'miracle' in the sense of divine intervention in the natural order, these writers altered the factual details. If this is so, then the issue is one of conflicting (or different) sets of presuppositions.

On the basis of his presuppositions, Niebuhr dismisses the historicity of the specific details of the resurrection narrative: the "most significant of which is the empty tomb. But he wants to maintain that the Resurrection is not merely a good idea with important ethical implications. The Resurrection, without which the church could not have come into existence, is true because it is a "different order of history" and a "miracle of a different order". But it is still history. Its truth is not to be searched for in objective history, but in the revelatory depth of this 'event'.

The difficulty with this form of argument is the one we discussed earlier in our section on "Neo-orthodoxy and Historical Criticism". If we claim that the revelatory depth of an event is the primary concern of faith, we must already be sure that there is an event (objective-historical) which has such revelatory depth. The Exodus and the Crucifixion present no problems in this regard. But it appears for Niebuhr that the Resurrection does. He therefore creates a "history of a different order" to overcome this problem. But as Hepburn points out the traditional Christian defence of the Resurrection lies precisely in the historical details of the narratives.

> "... if you are confronted with a human form, human facial expressions, gestures, a voice responsive in converstaion (and the 'detailed' resurrection-narratives provide all these with respect to the risen Christ), then the

> possibilities of illusion, hallucination, and the rest are enormously diminished. They are reduced to vanishing-point when all the features present in a normal meeting with a person are present also in the case in question."(63)

But the historicity of the "details" of the resurrection narrative are denied and only the existential encounter with Christ, reported in the narratives, is retained. What is retained, argues Hepburn, seem

> "at least as fallible as any documentary account about the rolling away of a stone or angels at the tomb... If we still say that the resurrection, though not accessible to objective--historical research, belongs nevertheless to 'a different order of history', are we saying any more than that some people, past and present, have a sense as of the presence of Christ?... (can we any longer) bring forward the objective historicity of Christ's resurrection as the justification of the otherwise rash assertion that all these senses of presence have been and are of the same person, identical with Jesus of Nazareth. And that appeal to objectivity here has undoubtedly been the supreme traditional defence against possibilities of imaginative illusion."(64)

Niebuhr is well aware of the difficulties which arise in consequence of his interpretation of the Resurrection. Insisting that revelatory truth must be apprehended by faith, which is to say existentially, and cannot "merely be accepted as historical fact, validated by the miraculous character of the fact"(65) is perilous. As Niebuhr himself says the peril lies in the

> "tendency to reduce Christianity to yet another philosophy, profounder than other philosophies... We say we take historical facts seriously but not literally; but that may be on the way of not taking them as historical facts at all."(66)

He believes, however, that the gain of this manner of interpretation is worth the price. For in this manner revelatory truth is not validated by 'miracle'; it must be apprehended by "repentance and faith".

To say this, however, does not absolve Niebuhr from the problems involved in asserting the historical nature of that revelatory truth. Even granting the important assertion which he makes concerning the need for such revelatory truth to be apprehended by faith, the problem of the empty tomb is not solved

by the torturous logic which he employs to do so. That logic, as we have tried to show, involves him in still more problems.

Is it necessary to dismiss the historical details of the resurrection narratives? Does the empty tomb have to be an embellishment? John Cumpsty, for one does not believe so.(67) He quotes Ihmels as saying, "We may say without exaggeration, at the tomb in Jerusalem the ultimate choice will be made between two totally different world-views." It is the failure to perceive this fact that leads Niebuhr into difficulties with the empty tomb. For, as Cumpsty shows, it is imperative to distinguish between the Greek and Hebrew world-views if we are to understand the significance to the disciples of the empty tomb.

Cumpsty argues as follows. The Hebrew had a unitive view of man; that is to say there is, in general, no body-soul dichotomy in Hebrew thought as there is in the Greek. Writing of the Semitic "totality concept" M.E.Dahl says: "When it comes to the human personality, we should not be surprised to find that man, too, is a totality, which embraces all that a man is and ever shall be. ... The Old Testament has no word for 'body' because this totality concept makes it unnecessary."(68) On the basis of this 'totality concept' Cumpsty argues that although later Hebrew thought was influenced by the Greek, and although body-soul language is used in the New Testament, it is not native to it. In the Hebrew view, therefore, "death means the destruction of the whole person and any future life means resurrection of the whole person." It is inconceivable that the early disciples made up the story of the empty tomb to prove that Jesus had risen. Why? Because as Hebrews the lack of an empty tomb, in the face of experience of communion with the risen Lord, would have denied the unitive view of man which they held. This unitive assumption is written into the narratives themselves; for when they heard from the women that they had seen Jesus, they ran to the tomb. If the body had been there "then he was not risen for there was only one unitive person." On the other hand, if the body had been there, then the "good news" of the resurrection would not have been news at all, at least to the Gentile world, for as Cumpsty says in a sermon on the resurrection:

> "Among the Gentiles there had been belief in immortal sould from time immemorial. They didn't need a few

> Hebrews who had regarded man as a unity, dust of the ground caused to live, to tell them that man had an immortal soul."

Resurrection of the whole person was both the good news and the scandal to the Gentile world. Paul and John who do much to make the gospel plausible to their Gentile hearers refuse to substitute the stumbling block of the resurrection of the whole person for the much more readily acceptable doctrine of immortal soul. For it is on this that the good news of the gospel, with all its cosmic significance, hangs.

Niebuhr argues that the resurrection narratives were altered to include the empty tomb "details in order that the revelatory truth of the resurrection may be validated. And he does so because his scientific world view makes it impossible for him to accept 'miracle' (empty tomb) as divine intervention in the natural order.

Cumpsty, on the other hand, argues that the empty tomb is an essential part of the resurrection narrative because of the Hebraic view of man-as-unitive. Such a view indeed has much in common with modern science which seems to be pointing in the same direction with its notion of the physico-chemical basis of personality.

Although the problem of the Resurrection is a touch-stone of modern theology and we are tempted to continue our examination of Niebuhr's contribution to the debate, our present concern to this point has been with his theological method.

It remains now to ask how Niebuhr uses the Resurrection to illuminate the human situation? For it is his primary concern, as we have seen to show the relevance of Christian truth for the human situation. In the final chapter of his Faith and History entitled "The Church and The End of History" he argues that the Biblical symbols "Resurrection" and "Last Judgement" should be taken seriously because "without them the Biblical faith degenerates either into Platonism or utopianism."(p.269) The end of history is not finis. Against the despair which finds meaning only in history, and sees the end of history only as finis, the Christian faith "hopes for an eternity which transfigures, but does not annul the temporal process" by the symbol of the resurrection(p.269) The symbol of the last judgement, on the

other hand, "emphasizes the moral ambiguity of history to the end. It negates utopian illusions in progressive interpretations of history..."(p.269).

Thus the Resurrection is one of Niebuhr's "myths of permanent validity" without which it is not possible to describe the ultimate realities of the temporal world. And without which false hopes about fulfilment in history, or despair about history's significance are inevitable. In the Resurrection we have a symbol which permits us to anticipate a fulfillment beyond all history. History continues its own ambiguous way: its meaning is fulfilled in another realm "beyond history". The affirmation of the Resurrection as an event of a "different order of history" is symbolic of this meaning.

To know what Niebuhr means by fulfillment of and beyond history remains a problem. His account of the origins of the symbol of Resurrection seems to indicate his satisfaction with an 'individual survival' interpretation of Resurrection. His application of the symbol, however, seems to suggest something more in terms of the whole "temporal process".

(c) History as "Contemporary Event"

If there is one thing that this essay has made clear thus far, it is that Niebuhr is no 'armchair theologian' whose chief interest is to devise a theological system 'unearthed', as it were, in the situation in which he found himself. In fact his primary concern, as his life and work testifies, was the dynamic relationship between faith and contemporaryevents. Whether or not we agree with Davis and Good that Niebuhr is "foremost a political and moral philosopher", we must agree with them when they say

> "... he has always been vitally engaged with the practical affairs of our troubled times... he has used experience powerfully as an empirical test of the adequacy of his own persuppositions. Anyone familiar with the development of his thought knows how painful was the process by which he moved from one frame of reference to another as each in turn proved to be an inadequate guide to the complexities of the human situation. He has made perfectly explicit the frame of reference which he finally found sufficient: his understanding of the classical and Biblical version of the Christian faith."(69)

The fact that Davis and Good, two political scientists have compiled a large volume of Niebuhr's writings on his political philosophy and its application to the contemporary situation, is perhaps sufficient evidence to show how successful Niebuhr was in his primary concern. But their volume is evidence of something else: something of primary concern to us in this section of our discussion of Niebuhr.

In compiling their volume Davis and Good drew upon material from no less than sixteen of Niebuhr's books and some one hundred and seventy of his articles, besides several unpublished selections. To distil from his massive and unsystematic output some understanding of how Niebuhr functioned in his contemporary situation is our purpose in this section. In order to do this we will examine the major categories - what Robert Fitch calls "handles to history" - with which Niebuhr operated. But, as Fitch points out, any attempt to distinguish between his "philosophy" of history and his "functioning" in and upon history "is probably in equal parts real and artificial. But it may help to illuminate the tension between the philosopher and the prophet in Reinhold Niebuhr."(70) Words like 'examine' and 'analyse' which are impossible to avoid in an essay of this nature expose us, however, to the dangers of artificiality of another sort when writing of Niebuhr. For he would disavow the label "philosopher" as much as he did the label "theologian". He describes himself as a teacher of Christian social ethics and apologetics; as a "circuit rider" actively involved in the defence and justification of Christian faith in a secular age.

To the question with which this essay began, Niebuhr's answer would be affirmative. Yes, we can deduce courses of social action from the faith. The real question is <u>whether</u> we do so, and <u>how</u> we do so. As far back as 1925, in the early years of his ministry in Detroit, Niebuhr wrote

> "When I sit through a church conference I begin to see a little more clearly why religion is on the whole so impotent ethically, why the achievements of the church are so meagre compared with its moral pretensions. .
>
> The church conference begins and ends by attempting to arouse an emotion of the ideal, usually in terms of personal loyalty to the person of Jesus, but very little is done to attach the emotion to

> specific tasks and projects Is the industrial life of our day unethical? Are nations imperialistic? Is the family disintegrating? Are young people losing their sense of values? If so, we are told over and over again that nothing will help but 'a new baptism of the spirit', a 'new revival of religion', a 'great awakening of the religious consciousness.'
>
> But why not be specific? Why doesn't the Church offer specific suggestions for the application of a Christian ethic to the difficulties of our day? If that suggestion is made, the answer is that such a policy would breed contention. It certainly would. No moral project can be presented and no adventure made without resistance from the traditionalist and debate among experimentalists. ... If the church could achieve schisms on ethical issues! They would represent life and reality."(71)

The mature Niebuhr of later years may have come to see that love is not the simple answer to every moral problem, and that it must be translated into justice if it is to be at all relevant to the perplexing problems of contemporary society. But maturity did not diminish his conviction that religion should not be ethically impotent. The "handles to history" which he wielded, he wielded for this purpose.

(i) REVELATORY EVENTS.

Whilst history may be morally ambiguous to the end, for the reason that history cannot be its own saviour, there are events in history which have revelatory significance. This is perhaps Niebuhr's basic presupposition about history. The revelatory event, as we have seen, is the Christ-event. But other events in history have revelatory significance also. If this were not so; if history were devoid of illuminatory moments; if all we could say about history was that it is "full of sound and fury, signifying nothing" - then how could we discern the signs of the times?

> "There are moments in history which are more than mere historic moments; for in them a whole course of history is fulfilled. In them the seeming chaos of the past achieves its meaning; and the partial and particular aspects of life are illumined to become parts of a complete whole."(72)

Such a view of history is, however, impossible without the prior assumption that history is the arena in which meaning is disclosed. The revelatory significance of events is however, possible only

for "those who have eyes to see": "Christ does not come to those who do not expect Him."(73)

Niebuhr's Leaves From The Notebook Of A Tamed Cynic, the journal he wrote whilst a pastor in Detroit, is full of examples of the significance he was able to draw from occurrences there. We have referred to one such occasion already: the implications he draws about ethical impotence from his attendance at a church conference.

His ability to see revelatory significance in historical events is well illustrated in an article entitled "History (God) Has Overtaken Us" written in 1941.(74) He writes

> "For years we have argued whether or not we should go to war. The implicit assumption of all these arguments was that we had the complete power to make this decision. Then history descended upon us and took the decision out of our hands. We might have known that it would be like this. History is not completely under the control of human decisions as either the interventionists or pacifists assumed."

Niebuhr sees the "grace" of God in his nation's participation in the war. He argues that ideally the American nation knew that it ought to resist injustice done to others as it does when injustice is done to it. But it took the Japanese attack to precipitate such resistance. That this should be so is a fact heavy with pathos. "We could not agree upon the peril in which we stood as a national community until the peril was upon us; that is the stupidity of collective man. And we could not agree upon our responsibilities to the victims of aggression until we had been joined to them, not by moral act but by historical fate." The pathos of this event can only be properly understood in the light of the "grace" of God

> "For the grace of God is on the one hand the providential working in history by which God makes the wrath of man to praise him, and transmutes good out of evil. In the immediate situation, that means that he persuades sinful men to consider the miseries and necessities of their fellow men by throwing them into like miseries and necessities...
>
> The other element in divine "grace" is the element of forgiveness..."

This means that we (America) must believe that God has the resources to wipe out the corruption which all our actions betray.

Without this America could come to believe that it was "justified" in declaring a "holy war" when, as the tenor of the argument seems to imply, it was moral inertia which kept America out of the war in the first place.

And what when the war is over? Niebuhr concludes his article by asserting that there can be no acceptance of grace without repentance. In this specific situation repentance must mean that "the catastrophes of these days will not only make us more resolute in achieving such justice and international community as sinful men may establish by the grace of God, but more humble and, therefore, more merciful in judging both our allies and our foes."

The United States' intervention in the second World War precipitated as it was by the Japanese attack on Pearl Harbour is a historical event which, for Niebuhr, was rich in revelatory significance. Standing in the tradition of a Jeremiah in the impending disaster from the neo-Babylonians, and of a Deutro-Isaiah who saw God's action in the emergence of the Persian Cyrus, Niebuhr sees in America's intervention that "History (God) Has Overtaken Us." Historians who work without his frame of reference may interpret the same historical events differently. Niebuhr would have no quarrel with this except to assert that the political life of man can ultimately only be interpreted with any sort of adequacy from a "profoundly religious standpoint". For only from such a standpoint do the events which have "overtaken us" provide the impetus for a more resolute striving for justice and international community, and a more merciful judgement of both ally and foe.

(ii) MYTH AND SYMBOL.

If history is revelatory of meaning, as Niebuhr argues it is, then it follows that an important aspect of his methodology will be devoted to the formulation of adequate ~~categories~~ VEHICLES to EXPRESS ~~vehicles~~ that meaning. It is our view that "myth" and "symbol" are those vehicles. In his exposition of Niebuhr's "philosophy of history" Robert Fitch describes his use of "symbolic events" as one of his "handles to history"; one which has been "a permanent part of his tool kit".(75) We would argue, however, that whilst symbolic events are indeed a permanent part of Niebuhr's "tool Kit", they

are in fact a fundamental vehicle of his method. As we shall show, myth and symbol are basic to the interpretation of history in Niebuhr's method, as a close study of the evolution of his thought shows. Such a study warrants a further criticism of Fitch's exposition in that he makes little of the place of myth in Niebuhr's thought. True, it is not always clear whether Niebuhr uses myth and symbol interchangeably or whether there are shades of difference in the use of those terms. It is not clear whether these terms denote a way of seeing history, or whether they are used to express the meaning of history. In his analysis of myth and symbol in Niebuhr's christology, Lehmann argues that

> "the prevailing tendency... seems to be to denote by the term 'myth' a method of thinking especially suited to understand and interpret the necessary connection between historical experience and the ultimate mysteries of the Biblical and Christian faith. 'Symbols' are verbal (though not exclusively so) and chiefly Biblical and creedal formulations of mythical apprehension."(76)

What is clear, however, is that from his earliest writing through to his latest, the proliferation of myth and symbol is, as Fitch says, "incredible both for scope and for variety."(77) For this reason, and because we believe that these are fundamental to Niebuhr's method, it is important not to misrepresent his thought at this point.

Myth and Symbol in the evolution of Niebuhr's thought.

As far as we can discover, Niebuhr's first exploration of the dimensions of myth appeared on print in his Reflections on the End of an Era published in 1934, some five years after he went to Union. This volume which consists of what he calls "tracts for the times" was written because he believed that

> "... the liberal culture of modernity is quite unable to give guidance and direction to a confused generation which faces the disintegration of a social system and the task of building a new one. In my opinion adequate spiritual guidance can come only through a more radical political orientation and a more conservative religious conviction than are comprehended in the culture of our era. The effort to combine political radicalism with a more classical and historical interpretation of religion will strike the modern mind as bizarre and capricious."(78)

Two chapters in this book are relevant to our understanding of the

evolution of myth in Niebuhr's thought: "Mythology and History" in which he argues that an adequate description of the nature of history must be mythological. In "The Assurance of Grace" he argues that the idea of grace, fundamental to the Christian faith, can only be stated adequately in mythological terms. We will return to the content of these chapters.

Following his Reflections, Niebuhr published the substance of his Rausehenbusch Memorial Lectures given at Colgate-Rochester Divinity School in a volume entitled An Interpretation of Christian Ethics in 1936. In this book he argues, as a foundation for the exposition of what he calls an independent Christian ethic, that Christianity stands in a mythical and not a mystical tradition, and expounds the "great religious myths (which) deal with creation and redemption."(79)

What might be described as his formal theory of myth is given in two publications: an article entitled "The Truth in Myths" published in a Festschift to his Yale professor D.C.MacIntosh,(80) and a book of sermonic essays entitled Beyond Tragedy. Both publications appeared in 1937, and set out what Niebuhr describes as "the necessary and perenially valid contribution of myth to the biblical world view."(81)

We believe it is highly significant that the evolution of Niebuhr's understanding of the place and validity of myth contained in the works we have cited took place during what we have described as his "Formative Years" at Union Theological Seminary, before he wrote his Gifford Lectures. Significant, because it was during these years that his search for adequate criteria for social choice took place. Historically, these were tumultous years; beginning with a period of unprecedented prosperity in the United States and ending with the outbreak of the Second World War. As we saw in Chapter Two, it was during this period that Niebuhr moved beyond pacificism, beyond socialism to a position which he describes as Christian Realism. What Niebuhr calls the "necessary and perennially valid contribution of myth" to the Biblical world view, therefore forms an integral part of the Christian Realism which provides him with the foundations for his work as a social ethicist during what we have called his "Mature Years".

With the publication in 1941 of the Gifford Lectures: The

Nature and Destiny of Man, and Faith and History in 1949, Niebuhr elaborates and expounds the symbols 'the image of God in man' and 'man as sinner' in order to pursue his thesis that the Biblical view of man is superior to both classical and modern views. The groundwork for this elaboration was, we believe, laid during his formative years.

Two further comments should be made concerning the evolution of Niebuhr's thought on myth and symbol. In the Living Library Volume on Niebuhr, published in 1956, he disavows the use of the term "myth" in reply to a criticism from Lehmann:

> "Lehmann makes one explicit criticism. He thinks my approach does not do justice to the divine initiative and to 'God's mighty acts'. I wonder whether this criticism may not be due to my use of 'myth' in describing the transcendent significance of Jesus. The word has subjective and skeptical connotations. I am sorry I ever used it, particularly since the project for 'demythologizing' the Bible has been undertaken and bids fair to reduce the Biblical revelation to eternally valid truths without any existential encounter between God and Man."(82)

In similar vein, Niebuhr speaks of his "unpardonable pedagogical error" in "The Nature and Destiny of Man" which he seeks to correct in his latest book Man's Nature and His Communities, published in 1965. He writes

> "My theological preoccupation prompted me to define the persistence and universality of man's self-regard as 'original sin'. This was historically symbolically correct. But my pedagogical error consisted in seeking to challenge modern optimism with the theological doctrine which was anathema to modern culture. I was in fact proud and heedless because I had taken pains to deny the historicity of the primitive myth of the fall of Adam in the garden...
>
> But these labours of modern interpretation of traditional religious symbol proved vain... The remnants of social optimism pictured me as a regressive religious authoritarian, caught in the toils of an ancient legend. But it was even more important that... political philosophers who were in substantial agreement with positions taken in my Gifford Lectures, were careful to state that their agreement did not extend to my 'theological presuppositions'."(83)

In this, his latest book, Niebuhr therefore uses what he calls "more sober symbols" for describing the "well-known facts" which occupied him in his Gifford Lectures.(84) One may discern, there-

fore, from a study of the evolution of his thought on myth and symbol, that before his Gifford Lectures he concentrated on the nature and validity of myth. His later writings, from these Lectures contain little reference to myth (the word does not appear in the index of either volume); he now shows a preference for the term 'symbol'.

The second point to note concerning the evolution of Niebuhr's thought is that there is perhaps some justification for Ronald Stone's suggestion that the publication of Man's Nature and His Communities marks what may be described as the "liberal-pragmatic" stage of Niebuhr's thought.(85) As we have noted, the primary difference between his Gifford Lectures and this latest book is the disappearance of the theological vocabulary in this later work. In this work he is concerned to translate his theologically informed view of man into nontheological terms. The differences between the Gifford Lectures and his latest book reflect not only a change in style, but also the process of intellectual evolution which has always been a hallmark of Niebuhr's life. It is true that Niebuhr could write in secular or theological style, depending on the circumstances of his writing, throughout his career. As Stone says, "the pieces in 'Christianity and Society' or 'Christianity and Crisis' are characterized by a much more frequent usage of theological terms than articles he wrote concurrently for 'The Nation' and 'The New Leader'".(86) Essentially, however, the changes discernable in his latest book reflect his conviction that Biblical myth and symbol need to be translated into terms relevant to the contemporary situation. This is borne out in Niebuhr's reply to Paul Tillich at a colloquium given in his honour in 1961, and recorded by Stone:

> "...I...made a mistake in hurling the traditional symbols of Christian realism - the fall and original sin - in the teeth of modern culture when I sought to criticize the undue optimism of the culture. Both these symbols, though historically significant, are subject to misunderstanding in a secular culture... I still think that Paul Tillich's translation of these symbols into ontological terms... is too Plotinian in that it implies, if not asserts, that the whole temporal process is a corruption of the eternal. Thereby one precious Biblical concept, embodied in the idea of the goodness of creation, may be obscured. I would now rather translate these historic symbols into descriptive, rather than ontological, terms."(87)

Four years after this statement, Niebuhr published Man's Nature and His Communities in which he seeks to translate the basic symbols of his Christian realism into descriptive terms. Thus it might be said that, in evolutionary terms, Niebuhr moved from a position in which he sought to explore and expound Biblical myth and symbol, to a position in which he sought to translate myth and symbol into descriptive terms relevant to the contemporary situation.

The Truth In Myth.

"In the lexicon of the average modern, particularly in America, a myth is a piece of fiction, usually inherited from the childhood of the race." This is so, writes Niebuhr, because the "scientific outlook of our mature culture has supposedly invalidated the truth value of these primitive stories."(88) He is well aware that under the impact of modern science, mythological thought has lost credence: we live in what has been described as a post-mythical age. Niebuhr, however, could never accept the claim that our's is a post-mythical age. In fact, he spent a lifetime arguing against the dangers inherent in the secularised myths of liberal utopianism and Marxism: sociopolitical myths have shown themselves to be potent forces in our so-called post-mythical age. In theological terms, Niebuhr believed that it is impossible to speak of God's activity in history except in mythical terms. Writing in 1937, Niebuhr condemns what he calls "the fashion of modern religion to defend itself against the criticisms of science by laborious reinterpretations of its central affirmations with the purpose of sloughing off the mythical elements, apologizing for them as inevitable concepts of infantile cultures"(89), and proceeds to argue that there are aspects of reality which neither science nor philosophy can adequately describe, and which can be stated only in mythical terms.

Niebuhr's preoccupation with the problems of mythical and symbolic language demonstrates his grasp of the issues which have dominated twentieth century thought to such a large extent. For there is much evidence to show that the problems constituted by myth and symbol including language, form the major pre-occupation of contemporary philosophy. John Hutchinson lists some of the inquiries which, "independent of each other, seem to be converging

upon the idea of language (and symbolism): logic, physical science, logical positivism and linguistic philosophy, social science, literary and artistic criticism, and inquiry into the nature of theological language.(90) Suzanne Langer's book Philosophy in a New Key develops the thesis that symbolism and language constitute the new key in which philosophy will be composed in the period ahead. She writes:

> "Every age in the history of philosophy has its own preoccupation. Its problems are peculiar to it, not for obvious practical reasons - political or social - but for deeper reasons of intellectual growth...
>
> (It has become apparent, she continues) that the age of science has begotten a new philosophical issue, inestimably more profound than its original empiricism... the edifice of human knowledge stands before us, not as a vast collection of sense reports, but as a structure of facts that are symbols and laws that are their meanings. A new philosophical theme has been set forth to a coming age: an epistemological theme, the comprehension of science. The power of symbolism is its cue, as the finality of sense-data was the cue to a former epoch."(91)

Whereas Langer argues that modern empirical science has given rise to new epistemological problems which will have to be dealt with by research into the nature and function of symbol, Niebuhr finds it necessary to explore the nature and function of myth and symbol because he believes that "it is quite impossible to establish a sense of meaning in history in scientific terms."(92) For Niebuhr, therefore, the primary function of myth is to provide the vehicle by which it is possible to picture the totality of historical experience. Writing in 1934, Niebuhr argues thus:

> "A philosophy of history adequate to bring all of the various perspectives, from those of economists and political strategists to the insights of artists and moralists, into a total unity must be endowed with the highest imagination. It must combine the exact data of the scientist with the vision of the artist and must add religious depth to philosophical generalization. An adequate philosophy of history must, in short, be a mythology rather than a philosophy... modern culture is too empirically rationalistic that it cannot do justice to the very history of which it is a contemporary spectator. It lacks a vision of the whole which would give meaning to the specific events it seeks to comprehend. A vision of the whole is possible only if it is assumed that human history has meaning... Meaning can be attributed to history only by a mythology."(93)

While it is easy for myth to be wrongly understood as scientific statement about reality as is the case, for example, where the story of creation is treated as historically or scientifically true, it is equally true that a scientific description of historic sequences will not suffice to convey the nature of total reality. It is for this reason that the functions of science and myth must be clearly defined. The function of myth is defined by Niebuhr in the following quotation:

> "It is the genius of true myth to suggest the dimension of depth in reality and to point to a realm of essence which transcends the surface of history, on which cause-effect sequences, discovered and analysed by science, occur. In its (science's) effort to bring coherence into its world it can escape the error of a too mechanistic view of reality only with the greatest difficulty and at the price of philosophical corrections to philosophical assumptions unconsciously implied in its method. It is bound to treat each new emergent in history as having its adequate cause in an antecendent event in history, thus committing the logical fallacy, post hoc, ergo propter hoc.
>
> The religious myth, on the other hand, points to the ultimate ground of existence and its ultimate fulfillment... But since myth cannot speak of the trans-historical without using symbols and events in history as its forms of expression, it invariably falsifies the facts of history, as seen by science, to state its truth. Religion must therefore make the confession of St. Paul its own: 'As deceivers and yet true' (2 Cor 6:8). If in addition religion should insist that its mythical devices have a sacred authority which may defy the conclusions at which science arrives through its observations, religion is betrayed into deception without truth."(94)

The important point to note is his claim that it is the function of religion to grasp mythically life in its unity and wholeness, and that of science to describe the relation of its parts.

An important aspect of Niebuhr's thought is the distinction he makes between "prescientific myths" and "myths of permanent validity". He is critical of Bultmann in that he believes that Bultmann does not make sufficient distinction between these two forms of mythological thought.(95) Niebuhr elaborates the distinction in his article "The Truth In Myths"; and argues that theologians retreated too far too quickly in the face of a scientific culture because they did not make this distinction sufficiently:

> "Their error was to disavow permanent myth with primitive myth. Religion had no right to insist on the scientific accuracy of its mythical heritage. From this point a retreat was necessary. That part of mythology which is derived from pre-scientific thought, which does not understand the causal relations in the natural and historical world, must naturally be sacrificed in a scientific age. But there is a permanent as well as a primitive myth in every great mythical heritage. This deals with aspects of reality which are supra-scientific rather than pre-scientific. Modernistic religion has been so thin on the whole because it did not understand this distinction and thus sacrificed what is abiding with what is primitive in religious myth."(96)

Niebuhr goes on to describe those aspects of reality which can only be stated adequately in mythical terms. In this article he deals with four such aspects: value (by which he means religion's attempt to grasp the organic unity of reality); the idea of creation (which relates the source of life to observable life); the myth of the fall (which comprehends the paradoxical nature of man's sin in terms of freedom and responsibility); and the religious myths of salvation (embracing the ideas of incarnation and atonement).(97) In his Beyond Tragedy he includes the parousia and the idea of the resurrection of the body as aspects of reality which can only be stated in mythological terms.(98) The themes of The Nature and Destiny of Man (the image of God in man, man as sinner, original sin, justitia originalis, the doctrine of grace, the atonement, the kingdom of God, the parousia, the last judgement, and the resurrection) may be regarded as his fullest exposition of those aspects of reality which can only be stated in mythological terms: though, as we have seen, he does not use the word myth at this point.

The Characteristics of Permanent Myth

The symbol of transcendence is integral with Biblical myth. For this reason Niebuhr would be in substantial agreement with Thielicke's criticisms of Bultmann in which he asserts that it is impossible to interpret a mythology in which there is a place for transcendence in terms of one in which there is no such place, and that the real issue today focuses on transcendence rather than mythology.(99) It is its transcendent referent that prevents religion from capitulation to the culture of any age, including the present one. For this reason, Niebuhr speaks of the quality of

transcendence in myth as its "most essential genius":

> "... it is the virtue of mythical religions that they discover symbols of the transcendent in the actual without either separating the one from, or identifying it with, the other. This is perhaps the most essential genius of myth, that it points to the timeless in time, to the ideal in the actual,but does not lift the temporal to the category of the eternal (as pantheism does), nor deny the significant glimpses of the eternal and the ideal in the temporal (as dualism does). (100)

Attempts to express the truth of "myths of permanent validity" in rational terms leads to absurdity. This for example, is the lesson Niebuhr draws from what he describes as the absurdity of theologies which "try to define the two natures of Christ and to distinguish between the temporal and the eternal in the mythical God-man."(101) A completely rationalized myth is itself an absurdity because it loses one of its essential characteristics: its capacity to point to the transcendent. Or, pointing to the transcendent, it loses its capacity to express the "organic and paradoxical relationship between the conditioned and the unconditioned". That is why, Niebuhr continues

> "as Clutton-Brock observed, religion is forced to tell many little lies in the interest of a great truth, while science inclines to tell many little truths in the interest of a great lie. The great truth in the interest of which many little lies are told is that life and history have meaning and that the source and the fulfilment of that meaning lie beyond history. The great lie in the interest of which science tells many little truths is that spatio-temporal realities are self-contained and self-explanatory and that a scientific description of sequences is an adequate analysis of causes."(102)

Niebuhr believes that religion has a greater affinity with the arts than it does with the sciences, and that great art is bound to be religious in the sense in which Goethe defines art - as the symbolization of the universal in the particular. The artist's portrayal of particular situations or emotions is always more than a mere portrayal of the particular. The great artist will, in his portrayal of the particular, convey suggestions of a universal or transcendent quality. Niebuhr developes this thesis in one of his favourite analogies in which he describes the differences between portraiture and photography.

> "A portrait is mythical as compared with the scientific exactitude of a photograph. Though a wise photographer will try to catch the permanent and significant rather than the passing mood of his subject he is always limited by the physical facts. The artist, on the other hand, falsifies some of the physical details in order to arrive at a symbolic expression of the total character of his subject, this total character being a transcendent fact which is never completely embodied in any given moment of the subject's existence. A really great portrait will go beyond this and symbolize not only the transcendent personality of the subject, but will contain suggestions of a universal human mood."(103)

There are dangers in the art of portraiture. A portrait can so misrepresent its subject matter as to become a caricature of the subject. Since mythical thinking is analogous to the art of portraiture, the artistic licence of the artist is analogous to the artistic licence of religion, and the same dangers are inherent in myth. For myth may so falsify the facts of experience and history as to provide a caricature of reality. But at their best, says Niebuhr, "both artist and prophet reveal the heights and depths of human experience by picturing the surface with something more and less than scientific exactness."(104) And, by so doing, provide us with a truer picture of reality than is possible in purely scientific terms.

Reference to the comparison between the artist and the prophet, leads us to examine a further assertion that Niebuhr makes for mythical thinking. For he argues that myth is an essential characteristic of the Hebrew prophetic tradition. Using Nathan Söderblom's distinction between religions of culture and religions of revelation (including Judaism and Christianity, and possibly Zoroastrianism) Niebuhr agrees that the distinguishing mark of the so-called cultural religions is that they "seek some rational or mystical discipline to penetrate to the eternal forms which transcend temporal reality."(105) These religions he defines as "mystical". On the other hand, the distinctive feature of religions of revelation (or prophetic religions) is the idea of the transcendent "involved in, but not identified with, the process of history."(106) These religions he defines as "mythical". Whilst Christianity has traces of a mystical tradition, it stands in a mythical tradition. Niebuhr developes this thesis in the following way:

> "(Christianity) owes its primary basis to a mythical rather than a mystical religious heritage - that of the Hebrew prophetic movement. Myths are not peculiar to Hebrew religion. They are to be found in the childhood of every culture... (and as such) mythical thinking is simply pre-scientific thinking ... it is (however) also supra-scientific... (in the sense that) classical myth refers to the transcendent source and end of existence without abstracting it from existence.
>
> In this sense the myth alone is capable of picturing the world as a realm of coherence and meaning without defying the facts of incoherence. Its world is coherent because all facts in it are related to some central source of meaning... The God of mythical religion is, significantly, the Creator and not the First Cause... (a rational conception)... To believe that God created the world is to feel that the world is a realm of meaning and coherence without insisting that the world is totally good or that the totality of things must be identified with the Sacred. The myth of the creator God is basic to Hebrew religion."(107)

The important conclusion which Niebuhr arrives at on the basis of this thesis is that the process by which the Hebrew tradition arrived at its radical monotheism was motivated by ethical rather than rational considerations. Evil is a fact of life, but it is not attributed to God or to nature. The myth of the fall does not identify sin with the genesis of life or with creation. Redemption, for prophetic religion, is a possibility because the God who transcends the created world, promises ultimate redemption. However, the "realm of redemption is never, as in rational and mystical religion, above the realm of living history, but within and at the end of it. The insistance of the Hebrew upon the sacred meaning of this life... is the root of all modern naturalisms, liberal and radical; though in the original Hebraic mythical view the processes of nature and history are never self-sufficient, self-explanatory, and self-redeeming. God will redeem history (that is the mythical emphasis in contrast to naturalism) but it is the living world in its history that will be redeemed (that is the mythical emphasis in contrast to the other-worldliness of rational-mystical religion)."(108)

Considering Niebuhr's ethico-political critique of the "soft utopianism" of secular and religious liberalism in America, and the "hard utopianism" of Marxism and Nazism, it may be said that the ethical consequences he draws from the Hebrew prophetic

emphasis on transcendence is a basic criterion for his social ethics. This may be seen in his An Interpretation of Christian Ethics where he writes:

> "The prophetic movement in Hebraic religion offers an interesting confirmation of the thesis that a genuine faith in transcendence is the power that lifts religion above its culture and emancipates it from sharing the fate of dying cultures. The prophets saved Hebraic religion from extinction when the Babylonian exile ended the Hebraic culture-religion with its centre in the worship of the Temple. They not only saved the life of religion, but raised it to a new purity by their interpretation of the meaning of catastrophe, the redemptive power of vicarious suffering, and the possibility of a redemption which would include more than the fortunes of Israel. In somewhat the same fashion Augustine's faith disassociated Christianity from a dying Roman world... ." (109)

The relationship between ethics and religion forms the subject of a chapter entitled "Mythology and History" in his earlier Reflections, in which Niebuhr explores the similarities and differences between classical Church,Christian sects, and Marxism in their responses to periods of crisis in history. He argues that "an adquate mythology of history must be able to do justice to the suggestions of meaning in momentary chaos."(110) Saint Augustine (who may be taken to represent classical theology was able to regard the collapse of the Roman Empire with some equanimity because, in Niebuhr's view, Augustine had a mythology which enabled him to see the "rise of the Catholic Church as more than adequate compensation for the disintegration of the empire."(111) This same quality is found in both Catholic and Protestant orthodoxy. Niebuhr describes it as an "individualistic mythology" by means of which the vicissitudes of a particular period can be transcended and peace found "either in an institution of grace (the Catholic doctrine) or in a personal experience of grace (the Protestant version) in which a realm of meaning above history was discovered." (112) Another answer to crisis in history is that of the apocalyptic Christian sects, whose members compromise the disinherited, and who look for redemption through divine intervention in the course of history instituting the millenium.

Marxist mythology, Niebuhr contends, has much to teach the Church in these critical times. Its mythology of history emphasizes, on the one hand, the conviction that man is responsible

for moral action in history (unlike the sects), and on the other hand it recognizes (with the sects) that historical patterns are developed not merely by those who try to weave them. "Events in history are (therefore) read from a perspective achieved by an ethical and even a religious passion."(113) The Marxist mythology is a secularized version of the Hebraic prophetic movement; as such it sees meaning in the historical process, without denying moral responsiblity in that process.

Just as there are Marxists who, with undue determinism, believe in the inevitability of revolution and are therefore tempted to escape moral responsibility, Niebuhr believes that Christian faith in God's redemption of history can tempt Christians to escapism. This he believes is the critical issue facing the modern church. "Religious hope always tends to encourage moral energy by promising victory to a seemingly hopeless moral enterprise, but it also enervates moral energy by guaranteeing victory too unreservedly."(114) Writing at a time of social disintegration and re-building, Niebuhr believed that Christianity must rediscover the moral imperative which belongs to its heritage: an imperative which Marxism has retained, but which Christianity appears to have lost. But the issue was more critical still. Because Marxism is a secularized version of the Hebrew prophetic tradition, it betrays itself in illusion akin to liberalism, and clothes itself in a "moral prestige... without moral constraint". This inevitably happens when the transcendent quality of the heritage is eradicated. We are men and not God. When we forget this we are tempted to a form of pride which produces the worst form of fanaticism. This point Niebuhr emphasizes with far greater outspokenness in a later article entitled "Why Is Communism So Evil?" In this article he argues that the basic cause of evil is the monopoly of power which communism creates. "Disproportions of power anywhere in the human community are fruitful of injustice, but a system which gives some men absolute power over other men results in evils which are worse than injustice ."(115) The abuse of power is, furthermore, supported and aggravated by a whole set of presuppositions and moral pretensions derived from what Niebuhr calls "the secular religion which creates the ethos of the communist society", and leads to the "tendency of playing God to human history... the cause for a great deal of communist malignancy."(116)

In summary, the symbol of transcendence in the Hebrew-Christian heritage provides the imperative for responsible moral action in history. It can, however, enervate moral energy. The secularized myth, be it Marxist or liberal, may retain the moral imperative which belongs to its nature as myth, but removes the constraints upon the abuse of power when the transcendent referent is eradicated. When this happens man tends to play God, and nothing in history is allowed to refute his presuppositions because nothing transcends him. This state of affairs is what Niebuhr calls "ideological dogmatism" so inflexible that nothing is allowed to test or falsify it, and in which the facts of historical experience are re-written to fit the ideology rather than being allowed to test it. The capacity for allowing such testing belongs only to mythical thinking in which the symbol of transcendence is present. The necessity for such testing now leads us to a discussion of verification.

Verification of the Truth in Myth.

"The ultimate problem of myth is always the problem of God", writes Niebuhr. Primitive myth seeks to picture the cause behind every natural phenomenon: as such it is pre-scientific, and must give way to the process of scientific explanation. On the other hand, permanent myth seeks to approach the "transcendent source of meaning" of all existence. It is here that the problem of verification is raised. "If the meaningfulness of life points to a source beyond itself, how is it possible to say anything about that transcendence, and how can anything that may be said be verified as true?",asks Niebuhr.(117)

Niebuhr's answer to this self-imposed question is contained in a tight-knit argument which concludes his article "The Truth In Myths". We shall summarize this argument, because in it he exhibits his belief that it is only in an inter-play between historical experience and mythical religion that an answer to the problem of verification can be found.

Not unexpectedly, Niebuhr first considers three non-mythical approaches(118) to the problem of verification. Basing his argument on a statement by Morris Cohen that the "vision into the Absolute is either into a fathomless depth in which no distinctions are visible or into a fulness of being that exceeds our

human comprehension", Niebuhr argues that mysticism can only express the distinctionless aspect of transcendence. It can say nothing about God except that he negates temporal reality. Philosophical idealism seeks to define the transcendent in rational terms, thereby destroying an essential quality of transcendence; namely its non-rationality in the ultimate sense. Modern naturalism, by contrast, has usually sought to understand the meaning of existence by denying the reality of transcendous. In so doing it has clothed the natural process itself with a quality of transcendence: the fruits of which are "either despair in a meaningless world or sentimentality in a world too simply meaningful." It is the failure of rational approaches to the meaning of existence that leads to the adoption of a mythical approach in which the transcendent is apprehended. It is here that Niebuhr poses a question concerning the danger of "dogmatism" in theology; a question which, as we have seen, he also poses for secular myth in his critique of Marxism. He writes:

> "... the problem of religion is how it may define God without resorting to a dogmatic acceptance of whatever mythical definition a particular historic tradition has entrusted to a certain portion of the religious community. The modern reaction against naturalism and rationalism expressed in Barthianism fails, significantly, to escape dogmatism. It is superior to the older dogmatisms of orthodox religion in that it does not insist on the scientific and rational validity of the mythical details of its tradition. The Fall and the Resurrection are not conceived as historical in its theology. But the total truth of the Biblical myth is asserted dogmatically with no effort to validate Christianity in experience against competition with other religions.
>
> How is it possible to escape this dogmatism? It is possible only if it be realised that though human knowledge and experience always point to a source of meaning in life which transcends knowledge and experience, there are nevertheless suggestions of the character of this transcendence in experience. Great myths have actually been born out of profound experience and are constantly subject to verification by experience. It may be simplest to illustrate this point in terms of a specific religious doctrine: the Christian doctrine that God is love and that love is the highest moral ideal.
>
> The ideal of love is not a caprice of mythology. It is not true because the Cross has revealed it. The Cross justifies itself to human faith because it symbolizes an ideal which establishes points of relevance with the deepest experiences and insights of human life...

> ... The transcendent source of the meaning of life is thus in such a relation to all temporal process that a profound insight into any process or reality yields a glimpse of the reality which is beyond it. This reality can be revealed and expressed only in mythical terms. These mythical terms are the most adequate symbols of reality because the reality which we experience constantly suggests a center and source of reality, which not only transcends immediate experience, but also finally transcends the rational forms and categories by which we seek to apprehend and describe it."(119)

To summarize Niebuhr's argument, myth and symbol are the only adequate vehicles for expressing the quality of transcendence. Profound insight into any aspect of human experience reveals glimpses of transcendent reality. It is in the inter-play between mythical expression of transcendence and the realities of human experience that profound myth is born, tested, and refined. It is for this reason, to use Niebuhr's celebrated expression, that myth and symbol must be taken seriously but not literally. If the symbol is taken literally the dialectical conception of time and eternity is falsified and the ultimate vindication of God over history is reduced to a point in history... On the other hand if the symbol is dismissed... as merely... picturesque or primitive... the relation of the historical to the eternal, the Biblical dialectic is observed in another direction. All theologies which do not take these symbols seriously will be discovered upon close analysis not to take history seriously either."(120) On the other hand, Biblical myth is not true because it is Biblical. It must be tested in the crucible of experience. Thus, although Niebuhr greatly modifies and changes his approach in his latest book, and disavows the use of symbols like "original sin", preferring "more sober symbols", the same criterion holds. Thus he writes: "I still think the London Times Literary Supplement was substantially correct when it wrote some years ago: 'The doctrine of original sin is the only empirically verifiable doctrine of the Christian faith.'"(121)

Some Criticisms.

As we have noted, Niebuhr made two specific criticisms of Bultmann. One concerns his failure to make a sufficient distinction betweenpre-scientific myth and myths of permanent validity. The other does not mention Bultmann specifically, but it levelled

at"the project for 'demythologizing' the Bible" which, Niebuhr argues, "bids fair to reduce the Biblical revelation to eternally valid truths..."(122) In this latter case, the critic of Niebuhr may well ask whether he does not lay himself open to the same charge which he levels at Bultmann? Furthermore, cannot the same strictures which Niebuhr in his formative years levels at those who, in the face of modern science, retreat too far too quickly in respect of their use of myth, be levelled at the Niebuhr who wrote Man's Nature and His Communities? That is to say, Niebuhr's criticism can be used against himself. Niebuhr's disavowal of the use of mythological language, and his attempt to correct the "pedagogical errors" of his Gifford Lectures in his latest book, raise some important questions. Is the issue simply a matter of the appropriate method of communication? If it is, then Bultmann may well respond by arguing that his project of demythologization was undertaken with the specific intention of finding a more appropriate way of communicating with modern man. And Bultmann may well add that Niebuhr has not understood his project very well when he says that it "bids fair to reduce Biblical revelation to eternally valid truths without any existential encounter between God and man."(123)

To put the issue in its simplest form, must we discard myth when seeking to communicate with so-called post-mythical modern man? If we must, then surely both Bultmann and Niebuhr are only left with 'eternally valid truths' once contained in the now-discarded myths. Niebuhr, for one, is well aware of the dangers inherent in this approach: "We say we take historical facts seriously but not literally; but this may be on the way of not taking them as historical facts at all... there is peril in this way of interpreting the Gospel truth. The peril lies in the tendency to reduce Christianity to yet another philosophy.."(124)

The issue may be put another way. How important is the form which Biblical myth takes, and can you retain the content if you reject the form? Ian Henderson posed the problem in this way:

> "Even if we start off by defining myth in a negative kind of way as what is not historically true, those myths which are found in the Bible might still prove to have an indispensible place in the Christian message. Let us take for example, the story of the Fall as it is found in Gen. 3. What that passage

> contains cannot be historical truth for it is not based on contemporary records. Yet it contains some kind of truth, for whatever did or did not happen in the Garden of Eden, man as we know him is fallen. That is why it has been said somewhere that if all the copies of Gen. 3 were lost, we should have to set to and write something similar.
>
> But would that something be a myth, or would it be a demythologized version of the Gen. 3 story. Grant that in such a case we would have to reproduce the content of the Genesis story, would we produce it in the same <u>form</u>?... For one of the issues between Bultmann and his critics is whether we can dispense with the form of the myth as long as we grasp the truth behind it."(125)

Niebuhr's response may well be to repeat his contention that we must take myth and symbol <u>seriously</u> not literally. By this, we take it, he means that it is the truth contained in the myth that is important, not the form. But if this is the case, then why his objections to the demythologization project? Further, it is a major thesis of Niebuhr's, as we understand him, that myth is the only adequate vehicle for apprehending the transcendent. If he wants to express transcendence he must, on his own admission, speak in mythical terms. Is not Thielicke right when he argues that it is impossible to interpret a mythology in which there is place for transcendence into one in which there is not.(126)

Another criticism may be expressed in these terms: is modern man in fact post-mythical? Or to put the question another way, is mythical thinking a characteristic only of Biblical times, or is it not a basic form of human thought? Again, it is a basic thesis of Niebuhr's that it is impossible to express the transcendent in anything other than symbolic and mythical terms. This surely holds true for modern man as much as it does for Biblical times. If Suzanne Langer is right, then symbol, myth, and ritual will play a significant role in this era.

We agree with Henderson when he writes: "is it not the transcendent rather than the mythological that man of to-day objects to? His quarrel is not so much with those who treat the other-worldly as this-worldly", as myth does, "it is rather with anybody who maintains that there is an other-worldly at all."(127) If you translate Henderson's "other-worldly" as transcendence, which is what we believe he means then we are back with Niebuhr once more. For he contends that Christian theism, with its conception of a transcendent-immanent God, can only be expressed in mythical terms.

Perhaps Niebuhr's rejoinder to this would be that the acceptance of his theological presuppositions is not as important as the acceptance, by realists and political philosophers, of his analysis of the human situation. Perhaps he would argue that the acceptance of the presuppositions on which his analysis was made is irrelevant as long as the truth of the analysis is grasped. The error he has confessed to is a pedagogical one.

We must now turn from an examination of Niebuhr's use of myth and symbol to another key for interpreting history which he may be discerned to use: namely his understanding of history as "drama". It should perhaps be stressed at this point that we use the word 'discerned' advisedly; for nowhere does he present us with a systematic treatment of his modes of thought in this regard. Furthermore, it should be noted that for the purposes of analysis it is necessary to distinguish different aspects of his thought. But in so doing we do not want to create an impression of discontinuity. All these aspects belong ultimately to the rich wholeness of his thought.

(iii) TRAGEDY AND IRONY IN THE DRAMA OF HISTORY

The historical process has been likened by Niebuhr to the painter's flat canvass. Any attempt to portray a feeling of depth on canvass necessarily involves the use of "deceptive symbols". Parallel lines, for example, are not drawn as parallel lines. They are made to appear as if they converge. For this is how they appear when envisaged from a total perspective. "The necessity of picturing things as they seem rather than as they are, in order to record on one dimension what they are in two dimensions, is a striking analogy, in the field of space, of the problem of religion in the sphere of time", writes Niebuhr.(128) This analogy between art and religion, to which we have referred in our discussion of myth and symbol, serves to indicate what might be termed the artist-observer role which Niebuhr adopts in his interpretation of the drama of history. It is this role rather than that of a philosopher or a critical historian which most accurately describes Niebuhr's stance before history.

As we have indicated, Niebuhr believed history to be revelatory of meaning. It contains 'symbols of transcendence' which point to the ultimate source of meaning, and which can most

adequately be expressed in mythological terms. Such a view of history is, he believes, integral to the Hebrew-Christian heritage. it is not surprising, therefore, that he should describe history as "drama". It is in The Self In the Dramas of History, written during what he describes as "two years of enforced leisure" after a serious operation in 1952, that he gives most explicit expression to the dramatic element in history. The book is primarily designed to explore the dimensions of human selfhood and acknowledges its indebtedness to Martin Buber's I and Thou. He summarizes the contents of Part One of the book so as to delineate his understanding of drama:

> "The dialogues of the self with itself, with others, and with God.
>
> The freedom of the self which makes these dialogues possible. Drama as the historical deposit of the dialogues."(129)

The self, by virtue of its freedom over the natural process(which determinism denies), is enabled to be a "creator" in history. But the self is not only a creator. It is also a "creature" of the web of historical events in which it participates (something which voluntarism tends to overlook). Any view of history which blurs the double role of the self, as creator and creature leads to error. Freedom and necessity are integral aspects of the self. If justice is to be done to both these aspects of the self, a dramatic view of history is the only adequate one to hold. Niebuhr argues for this view in the following way:

> "The dialogues, in which the self is involved, are transmuted into dramas whenever they precipitate action. These actions are formed into dramatic patterns which constitute a web of destiny for the individual... These dramatic patterns may extend to various communities, family, local, or national. The dramatic patterns are historic realities in which freedom and necessity are variously compounded...
>
> The dramatic patterns contain causal sequences which may be analysed with some degree of accuracy... (but these) analyses of historical patterns must lack the scientific precision which characterize the conclusions of the natural sciences... they must fail in the test of predictability which is the hallmark of any exact science.
>
> Historical patterns are in a category of reality which cannot be identified with the structures of nature. They are to be sharply distinguished from natural structures because they represent a compound of freedom and necessity."(130)

It is because historical patterns are so complex that they defy attempts at generalization by either scientist or philosopher. For where variables are multiple and cannot be dissociated verification, the vary basis of a scientific or philosophical handling of history, is an impossibility. History, therefore, could never be completely described and determined by cycles or patterns of development. That there are appearances of cycle and development within human history is beyond question. However, in Niebuhr's view "both describe, not patterns, but conditions for the historical drama."(131) The fact that the patterns which appear cannot be rigorously verified is in keeping with the experience of human freedom. The historical drama is just this paradoxical struggle between freedom and necessity.

The unique contribution of the Biblical tradition to the understanding of history lies in its concepts of freedom and responsibility, and in its view of history as drama. Niebuhr acknowledges that this tradition has often been corrupted. He is under no illusions in this regard. The Biblical tradition is, and has been, subject to error. At best, however, the Biblical tradition has "guarded the 'facts' of freedom and responsibility and acknowledged the selfconcern of the self... It also introduced a sense of the dramatic quality of history and the uniqueness of its various occasions..."(132)

Whilst The Self in the Dramas of History was written relatively late in Niebuhr's career, it does elaborate a theme which is subordinate in some of his earlier books, as he points out in its Preface. Considering the evolution of his thought as a whole, it can be argued that his understanding of history as "drama" is a theme which runs through most of his work. In the evolution of his thought, however, the dramatic interpretation of history has remained constant whereas the 'actors' and the 'action' have changed with his changing perspectives.

His disillusionment, for example, with liberalism: political, theological, economic, and moral has been documented in Chapter Two of his work. While his later polemics against liberalism tend to obscure his indebtedness to the liberal tradition, it may be argued that his disillusionment stemmed from the belief that this tradition did not do justice to the drama of history.

Liberalism, in the sense of a totally optimistic philosophy of life, was not warranted when viewed in the context of the dramas of history. Thus, in 1936, Niebuhr wrote:

> "Liberalism is in short a kind of blindness... It is a blindness which does not see the perennial difference between human actions and aspirations, the perennial source of conflict between life and life, ... the torturous character of human history."(133)

Niebuhr's move "beyond Socialism", particularly in its Marxist form, is another example of a change in perspective prompted by the fact that this alternative to liberalism was inadequate when viewed in the context of the dramas of history. There is no doubt that he was attracted to Marxism partly because of its realism, partly because of its social analysis and its vision of a more just socialized society. In an interview with Ronald Stone, Niebuhr described his Reflections on the End of an Era, which documents his fascination with Marxist mythology, as his "most Marxist work."(134) However, his attraction to Marxism was never unqualified, as we showed in Chapter Two and in this present chapter. His rejection of Marxist and Socialist alternatives was based in part upon a critique of the tenets of these alternatives, and partly because they did not 'fit' the facts of historical experience. Stone sums up Niebuhr's position in regard to liberalism and Marxism, when he writes:

> "The criticism of Marxism was in essence the same as the criticism of liberalism; both creeds were blinded by utopian illusions to the need for resolute political action for achievable moral ends. Marxist realism had exposed the illusions of liberalism, and Augustinian realism exposed Marxist illusions."(135)

We would disagree with Stone's conclusions in one important respect. It was not an "Augustinian realism" which enabled Niebuhr to refute Marxist illusions. It was rather a composite of a rediscovery of the validity of the prophetic element in the Biblical tradition plus an indebtedness to Augustine, which Niebuhr called Christian Realism, that enabled him to do so. And it was from this composite moral tradition that there emerged the concepts of "tragedy" and "irony" that were integral with Niebuhr's interpretation of history in his mature years.

Tragedy and Irony in History.

Niebuhr's Beyond Tragedy is devoted to an exposition of the dialectical relationship between time and eternity, between God and the world, and between nature and grace, as these are conceived within the Christian faith. An ancillary theme of the sermonic essays in this book is, as we have seen, the exposition of the nature and function of myth and symbol. The thesis of the book, based on the centrality of the Cross in the Christian world view, is elaborated in the following passage from the Preface:

> "It is the thesis of these essays that the Christian view of history passes through the sense of the tragic to a hope and an assurance which is 'beyond tragedy'... Christianity's view of history is tragic insofar as it recognizes evil as an inevitable concomitant of even the highest spiritual enterprises. It is beyond tragedy inasfar as it does not regard evil as inherent in existence itself but as finally under the dominion of a good God."(136)

This book, published in 1937, is perhaps the most important one to come out of his formative years when he was searching for an alternative to the liberal and socialist views of history with which he had become disillusioned. It is significant, we believe, that it was written during the period when his search for an alternative led him to a rediscovery of the significance of the prophetic interpretation of history in the Biblical tradition and the Augustinian interpretation in classical theology.

The roots of Niebuhr's notion of 'tragedy and beyond tragedy' are many. Richard Kroner in tracing the historical roots of Niebuhr's thought believes that Dostoevsky and Unamuno exerted an influence on his thought.(137) His realism arises from the fact that Niebuhr is neither an optimist nor a pessimist in any ultimate sense, though his belief that there is a position 'beyond tragedy' places him closer to optimism. His realism is derived in part also, from the lessons he learned from the liberal and socialist traditions. To deny this would be to misrepresent the development of his thought. For it is the same man thinking about history who arrives at a belief in a position 'beyond tragedy'. However, the roots of his thought are early embedded in the Biblical and classical traditions. Proof of this fact is a passage in his Reflections(1934):

> "The genius of classical religion is that it finds a basis for optimism after it has entertained the most thoroughgoing pessimism . In the classical religious worldview man himself is conceived as a source of chaos... no complete emancipation from the confusion and self-destruction of conflicting egoisms is expected in mundane history. Such emancipation is expected only above history (in the Greek view) or at the end of history (according to Hebrew mythology)."(138)

In a much later work The Irony of American History (1952) Niebuhr defined tragedy in terms which reveal how deeply embedded are these roots. It also reveals how his understanding of the tragic element in history remained a constant motif: "The tragic element in a human situation is constituted of conscious choices of evil for the sake of good. If men or nations do evil in a good cause; if they cover themselves with guilt in order to fulfil some high responsibility; or if they sacrifice some high value for the sake of a higher or equal one, they make a tragic choice... Tragedy elicits admiration as well as pity because it combines nobility with guilt."(139) In the drama of contemporary history an outstanding example of tragedy in Niebuhr's view is the necessity for using nuclear deterrants for the preservation of peace.

A provisionally tragic view of history remained an essential part of Niebuhr's thought. Crucial to this view is Niebuhr's assertion that men are involved in the conscious choice of evil in their search for justice in history The figure of David is perhaps the most outstanding symbol of this tragic element in history.(140) For, as Niebuhr says, "David was a man of war and also a man of God." As king and statesman David was responsible for the uniting into one kingdom of the tribes of Israel, and as such was involved in conflict and war. But because he had shed blood in carrying out his responsibilities, he was considered not worthy enough to build the Temple. How can a man involved in war build a temple to a God who transcends conflict and stands in judgement of the sins involved in the pursuit of the highest values. The historical answer to this dilemma was that Solomon built the temple, and not David. But the Temple was not built, argues Niebuhr on the virtues of Solomon's reign, but on the stability achieved through David's reign of uneasy conscience. David is the symbol of the tragic element in history, for it is

because of the ambiguities of human enterprise that the pursuit of a good cause should involve men in compromise. Yet it is also the source of all genuine creativity in history. "Whatever the prophets may say therefore", concludes Niebuhr, "there will always be King Davids. Nor could history exist without them. They are actually the authors of all human enterprise. Many of them do not have David's uneasy conscience." (141) For those who are involved in compromise, and who do have an uneasy conscience, the church must be that place in society where men are not only disturbed by the word of judgement but where the word of God's mercy, consolation, and reconciliation is heard.

It is perhaps this view of the tragic which led Niebuhr to speak a belated word in mitigation of his disapproval of Henry Ford, with whom he had fought so bitterly in his Detroit days. As he told an interviewer from the Oral History Research Section of Columbia University:

> "Perhaps I ought to confess ... that I'm not as sure as I was in my Detroit days that Henry Ford was quite as bad as I thought him to be ... (Nonetheless) contrasting Ford's idealism without self-knowledge and Fred Butzell's idealism and shrewed self-knowledge awakened me from my moralistic slumber." (142)

It remains, however, one of the enigmatic features of Niebuhr's thought that in spite of this confession he was never able to credit Henry Ford with the undoubted contribution he made to the progress of industrialization in the United States. This is all the more puzzling when we consider his understanding of tragedy. It appears that Niebuhr was able to treat David more sympathetically than he was able to treat Henry Ford. Yet it is a real question as to whether Ford is not a modern counterpart of David in the sense in which history has shown Ford to be an "author of ... human enterprise" even if he did not, in Niebuhr's view, have an "uneasy conscience".

Whereas tragedy involves a conscious choice of evil for the sake of good, the ironic element in history is related to an unconscious weakness in the human situation. While the concept of tragedy remained an integral part of Niebuhr's interpretation of history, he himself moved beyond tragedy with the publication in 1952 of The Irony of American History. The shift from a tragic to an ironic interpretation of history is, as we have come to expect of Niebuhr, concomitant with other changes in his thought.

In the post World War Two era he became increasingly involved with the problems of international politics. It was also the period during which he became engrossed in a vindication of democracy. Before the war had ended, he published The Children of Light and the Children of Darkness: a book which has as its subtitle "A Vindication of Democracy and a Critique of Its Traditional Defence." In her biography Bingham calls the chapter which deals with this period of Niebuhr's life: "Selling Democracy". In it she describes the situation out of which this book was born in these terms:

> "Already, during the war, as Niebuhr flew the Atlantic in his bucket seat, he had conjectured that the self-corrective system of democracy was the primary aim for which the Allied forces were fighting. Through their heroic efforts, backed by the industrial might of the home front, this system was being saved from it enemies. But how was it to be saved from its friends."(143)

His defence of democracy, and his involvement in international politics were partly responsible for the shift from a tragic to an ironic view of history. Equally important is the shift which may be discerned in the Niebuhr of the late forties when he turned from probing the causes of evil in history to which he had devoted so much of his life, to give attention to possible solutions. It is a period marked by a new openness to the possibilities of human accomplishments. Niebuhr's openness to these possibilities is qualified however, by his understanding of irony.

Once more it is the interplay between the contemporary situation and the Biblical tradition which produce the mode of interpreting history for Niebuhr. That mode is irony. He uses it because it is more adequate than tragedy for the elucidation of the possibilities and dangers inherent in contemporary history. And it is these possibilities and dangers which force him back to the Biblical tradition where he finds support for an ironic mode of interpretation.

Niebuhr defines irony in the following manner:

> "Irony consists of apparently fortuitous incongruities in life which are discovered, upon closer examination, to be not merely fortuitous. Incongruity as such is merely comic. It elicits laughter. This element of comedy is never completely eliminated from irony. But irony is something more than comedy.

> A comic situation is proved to be an ironic one if a hidden relation is discovered in the incongruity. If virtue becomes vice through some hidden defect in the virtue; if strength becomes weakness because of the vanity to which strength may prompt the mighty man or nation; if security is transmuted into insecurity because too much reliance is placed upon it; if wisdom becomes folly because it does not know its own limits - in all such cases the situation is ironic."(144)

Irony must be distinguished from pathos and tragedy. In a pathetic situation, a person is caught up in a fortuitous circumstance over which he has no control, as for example, in a natural disaster. As we have seen, a tragic situation is one in which a conscious choice is involved, and therefore a degree of responsibility also. Furthermore, "while a pathetic or a tragic situation is not dissolved when a person becomes conscious of his involvement in it, an ironic situation must dissolve, if men or nations are made aware of their complicity in it."(145) Men or nations may respond to a disclosure of the irony of their situation in one of two ways, says Niebuhr. It may lead to "an abatement of the pretension" which gives rise to the irony; this he terms "contrition". On the other hand, awareness of irony may lead to a "desperate accentuation of the vanities to the point where irony turns into pure evil."(146)

By pointing to the ironic element in contemporary history, Niebuhr believed he could expose the unconscious weaknesses he discerned in the strengths of his own country. As Cervantes had laughed at the ideals of chivalry through Don Quixote, so Niebuhr sought to use irony to expose the hidden dangers lurking in post-war America. It is the hidden, or unconscious quality of the ironic in history which is so well symbolized for Niebuhr in Cervantes' figure. "Don Quixote's ironic espousal and refutation of the ideals of knight errantry may be detected by the reader whose imagination is guided by the artist-observer, Cervantes." But, Niebuhr adds, "Don Quixote is as unconscious of the absurdity of his imitation of the ideals of chivalry as the knights are unconscious of the fraudulence of their ideals."(147)

To be able to discern irony in history it is necessary to adopt the role of an "artist-observer" who is at once both detached from, and involved in that history. For this reason ironic interpretations of history are difficult. Yet men do have the capacity

to transcend their situations and so are able to detect the irony in them. However, this happens only rarely in history because as Niebuhr says, "the combination of critical, but not hostile, detachment, which is required..., is only infrequently attained." While conceding that irony may be detected in history by men without the presuppositions of Christian faith, Niebuhr finds support for an ironic view of history in that faith. In fact he argues that the Christian faith makes the ironic view of history "normative". On the one hand, the Biblical view of evil is ironic, and on the other hand, the Biblical view of human freedom is ironic. In Niebuhr's own words:

> "... the Christian faith tends to make the ironic view of human evil in history the normative one. Its conception of redemption from evil carries it beyond the limits of irony, but its interpretation of the nature of evil in history is consistently ironic. This consistency is achieved on the basis of the belief that the whole drama of human history is under the scrutiny of a divine judge who laughs at human pretensions without being hostile to human aspirations...
>
> The Biblical interpretation of the human situation is ironic, rather than tragic or pathetic, because of its unique formulation of the problem of human freedom... man's freedom does not require his heroic and tragic defiance of the forces of Nature ... He is not necessarily involved in tragedy in his effort to be human. ... His situation is not... comprehended as a pathetic imprisonment in the confusion of Nature. The evil in human history is regarded as the consequence of man's wrong use of his unique capacities... Man is an ironic creature because he forgets that he is not simply a creator but also a creature."(148)

Niebuhr, thus, finds justification for his use of irony as a mode of interpreting history in the Biblical conception of man. Man is both creator and creature; both free agent and responsible. An ironic interpretation of history is required if these two aspects of man's nature are to be held in creative balance. An ironic interpretation becomes necessary when it is apparent that this creative balance is in danger of being lost.

Niebuhr believed that the advent of the nuclear age has given new plausibility to a tragic view of history. He also believed, however, that a purely tragic view of life is not "finally viable". It is, at any rate, not the Christian view" according to which, he wrote, "destructiveness is not an inevitable

consequence of human creativity. It is not invariably necessary to do evil in order that we may do good."[149] There will always be tragic elements in history. Good and evil will always be curiously admixed in history. But, Niebuhr argued

> "... the Christian faith is surely right in not regarding the tragic as the final element in human existence. The tragic motif is, at any rate, subordinated to the ironic one because evil and destructiveness are not to be regarded as the inevitable consequence of the exercise of human creativity. There is always the ideal possibility that man will break and transcend the simple harmonies and necessities of history, and yet not be destructive. For the destructiveness in human life is primarily the consequence of exceeding, not the bounds of Nature, but much more ultimate limits. The God of the Bible is, ... 'jealous'. But His jealousy is not aroused by the achievements of culture and civilization. Man's dominion over Nature is declared to be a rightful one. Divine jealousy is aroused by man's refusal to observe the limits of his freedom."(150)

When man refuses to observe 'the limits of his freedom' in this ultimate sense, then 'virtue becomes vice' and must be exposed for what it is.

Having come to this understanding of irony, he devoted much of his writing beginning with The Irony of American History to the task of revealing the ironies of contemporary history. Ronald Stone has shown that between 1952 and 1969 Niebuhr wrote or jointly-authored four major books with this specific function.[151]

Niebuhr believed that American history was particularly open to ironic interpretation. Communism, on the other hand, revealed not only the heights of irony, but also the dangers that abound when irony is not heeded. "Our modern liberal culture", he wrote, "of which American civilization is such an unalloyed exemplar, is involved in many ironic refutations of its original pretensions of virtue, wisdom, and power." However, he continued, "Communism has already elaborated some of these pretensions into noxious forms of tyranny" and we are therefore involved "in the double irony of confronting evils which were distilled from illusions not generically different from our own."[152]

A particularly good example of his application of an ironic interpretation of contemporary history is an article he wrote for

the Journal of International Affairs in 1967, which he called "The Social Myths in the 'Cold War'".(153) We choose this article because it not only reveals the way Niebuhr applied irony to history, but also indicates his use of myth in contemporary history.

In the above article Niebuhr explores the ironic element in the 'Cold War' by comparing the myths and realities evident in the contest between the Soviet Union and the United States. Both these "super-powers", he argues, reveal imperialistic dimensions and have foreign policies which are supported by social myths.

He defines a social myth as a "collective self-image", and argues that every "class and nation defends itself and justifies its interests by a social myth". Such a myth is "constructed by imaginative elaborations of actual history" but hardly ever "made out of the whole cloth" of that history. This is because no nation has a purely rational understanding of its history: reason is "always part master and part servant" of the "social self".

Communism, writes Niebuhr, has achieved its political and economic status on the basis of "a most comprehensive myth, rooted in an apocalyptic, semi-religious, and pseudo-scientific program of revolutionary social redemption from all social injustice " (154)

Its social presuppostions have a more vivid mythical basis than those of Western democracies. But this is not to say that Western democracies have no mythical basis. As he has stated elsewhere, "democracy is a 'bourgeois ideology' in so far as it expresses the typical viewpoints of the middle classes who have risen to power in European civilization", and most of the democractic ideals, as we know them, were weapons of the commercial classes."(155) There is, however, a precaution which Niebuhr contends must be born in mind when discussing the characteristics of social myth. While it is generally supposed that democracy has its basis in what he stigmatizes as the "mythically pure individualism" of bourgeois society, the history of so-called "free societies" suggests that they, to some degree, established themselves for other reasons than those contained in their official myths. Their development does not always correspond to the social myth by which they justify themselves. Niebuhr argues, for example, that in the democratic nation-state the sovereign power was usually secure enough to allow the development of trade-unionism to take place. By this process of pressure and

counter-pressure, a "tolerable equilibrium of power" was established, as a result of which a free society was produced.[156] Niebuhr devotes a chapter of The Irony of American History entitled "The Triumph of Experience Over Dogma" to a fuller elaboration of what he calls the "ironic form of success" in the experience of America;[157] where pragmatism has dictated the course of events to a far greater extent than Americans themselves are prepared to admit.

The thesis which Niebuhr sets out to demonstrate in relation to the 'Cold War' is that there is irony to be discerned in the fact that both the Soviet Union and the United States promote the myth of anti-imperialism while at the same time practising a form of it. "It is one of the most vivid ironies of modern history", he writes, "that both these superpowers express ideals of anti-imperialism,"[158] whereas both "also wield imperial power."

The anti-imperialist myth of the U.S.S.R. is derived largely from two sources. On the one hand, both Marx and Lenin developed the dogma that imperialism is the fruit of capitalism which thrives on the acquisitive impulse, and will therefore exploit foreign markets in pursuance of that impulse. Since Communism is the negation of everything that capitalism stands for, it cannot be imperialistic. The "curious phenomenon of an anti-imperialist Communist imperialism" may be accounted for, on the other hand, by the myth of social redemption in the Communist creed. Communism is universalistic by nature, writes Niebuhr, because of its 'missionary urge' to build a supranational empire based on the socialization of property. "The Communist saw this supranational integration as nothing but a 'fraternal' relationship between the holy land of the new religion and all the smaller, often non-technical nations. According to the Communist myth, there are no power rivalries in the 'socialist camp'. They were all eliminated by the elimination of the source of all evil: property. With the socialization of property, the world obviously must experience a new reality in which power rivalries would no longer figure in the relationship of strong and weak nations."[159] The rationalization of the imperialism of the Soviet Union in terms of its mythology is ironic. For, in terms of its own mythology, imperialist expansionism is transmuted into a drive to rid the world of the evils inherent in capitalism, and so pave the way for a new day.

The rationalization of imperialism is, however, a feature common to both the Soviet Union and the United States. "Each nation tends to universalize its own domestic achievement. Democracy, for example, is regarded by many as universally desirable and applicable. But,... it may be a political myth to regard the democratic achievement as a possibility for all cultures and economies."(160) The tendency to universalize democracy is the basic reason for imperialist pretensions of the United States, in spite of its avowed anti-imperialism. The anti-imperialist myth of the United States is derived, on the one hand, from the fact that this nation is against the imperial designs of its adversary and therefore believes itself to be innocent of the crime committed by it. This "myth of innocence" is supported, on the other hand, by the liberal democratic universalism expounded by Locke, Jefferson, and Woodrow Wilson. Niebuhr believes that "Thomas Jefferson was probably the first of a long line of American liberal democratic anti-imperialists to equate democracy with the ideal of universalism", and Wilson was in accord with the "American sense of messianic mission" when he "projected a moral goal" for America's entry into the First World War by arguing that "it was a 'war to make the world safe for democracy'".(161) Two chapters in the national history of America provide further proof, in Niebuhr's view, of the nation's capacity for self-deception in the process of its expansionism. Under the slogan of 'Manifest Destiny', the nation was able to give credance to its expansionism in its "acquisition of Texas from Mexico", for example. This slogan gave the nation the "cover of moral or 'democratic' purpose". The second chapter relates to "our venture in overt, rather than covert, imperialism" when America declared war on Spain - "a war that gave us the booty of the entire Spanish imperial domain in the Caribbean and Pacific."(162)

If the Soviet Union is guilty of imperialism under the guise of its utopian illusions, the United States is no less guilty of imperialism under the guise of democratic universality. The failure of Communism to take root in Western nations, where a form of political freedom had been established before the development of modern industrialization, is evidence of the difficulty of universalizing domestic achievement. Niebuhr contends that although Western democracies were slow to correct the myth of

bourgeois individualism, the fact that the worker was able to organize collective bargaining power has made the Communist myth irrelevant in these nations. The context in which Communism was born is to a large extent responsible for the success it achieved there. Where the context is significantly different, the Communist alternative becomes less plausable.

Likewise it would be wrong to assume that the success of American democracy is repeatable elsewhere. Niebuhr points out that "democracy is an achievement that requires cultural, technical, and other capacities on the part of a population" that make the task a difficult one. It may, therefore, be a "political myth to regard the democratic achievement as a possibility for all culture and economies". Historical evidence seems to show "that only a few nations of Western Europe had the necessary homogeneity, educational level, and political skill to make the democratic principle of 'authority by consent of the governed' workable."(163) There is mounting evidence Niebuhr believes, that the Asian and African continents, with their diversities of language, religion, and culture do not provide suitable soil for a democratic form of government.(164)

Niebuhr, concluding his article with the words of U Thant the then Secretary-General of the United Nations, writes: "I see nothing but danger in the idea, so assiduously cultivated outside Vietnam, that this conflict is a kind of holy war between two powerful political ideologies."(165)

The exposure of the ironic in a particular situation may lead to the abatement of the pretensions which gave rise to the irony. It may also lead to a heightening of those pretensions. Since the publication of Niebuhr's article, there has been an abatement of tension between the Soviet Union and the United States. This is at least partially due to the recognition of the irony in the American pretension especially by the young of America, in particular, and of the West in general. It may also be, ironically, that the abatement owes at least something to the struggle for power within the Communist block; whose pretension it is that there can be no conflict between brothers.

To conclude our discussion of irony we must turn to Niebuhr's validation of it as a mode of interpretation.

The Validation of Irony as a mode of Interpretation.

Is the discernment of an ironic element in American history, or in modern history, merely subjective? Is it merely superimposed upon the data of history? Niebuhr believed that questions of this sort raise the important issue of the nature of the presuppositions which guide the observer of history. History, he writes, "might be likened to the confusion of spots on the cards used by psychiatrists in a Rorschach test. The patient is asked to report what he sees in these spots; and he may claim to find the outlines of an elephant, butterfly or frog. The psychiatrist draws conclusions from these judgements about the state of the patient's imagination rather than about the actual configuration of spots on the card."(166) Must we conclude that "historical patterns are equally subjective", asks Niebuhr.

Patterns of meaning, be they ironic or of some other sort, are arbitary if they "do violence to the facts, or single out correlations or sequences of events, which are so fortuitous that only some special interest or passion could persuade the observer of the significance of the correlation."(167) An example of this criterion enunciated by Niebuhr would be the Marxist indictment of capitalism which argues that capitalist expansionism is motivated by an exploitive impulse. This is a mythical distortion of the facts. While it is true that modern European nations used their superior technical, commercial, and political knowledge in the process of expansion, it is a gross oversimplification of the facts to single out exploitation as the primary motive for that expansion.(168)

The problem of subjectivity is complex. Niebuhr concedes that there is an element of subjectivity in all historical interpretation. However, there is need to distinguish between purely arbitary judgements which either have no basis in historical fact, or which deliberately distort the facts to fit the judgement, and those judgements which give real illumination to the kaleidescopic events of history. The real issue, for Niebuhr, is not that history is interpreted on the basis of a particular set of presuppositions. He would concede that there is rarely an interpretation of history which is not based on some presuppositions. Rather, the issue is whether the interpretation of history,

made on the basis of presupposition, is credible as it stands. He puts the issue in this way:

> "... the question is whether the interpretations have any legitimacy or credibility to the observer apart from his acceptance of the governing principle of interpretation which prompted the generalizations. To be specific, is an ironic interpretation of current history generally plausible; or does its credibility depend on a Christian view of history in which the ironic view seems to be particularly grounded?"(169)

There are situations in history which lend themselves to ironic interpretation because they are obviously ironic: but these may be detected by an observer without recourse to a Christian view of history. "Nevertheless", writes Niebuhr, "the consistency with which the category of the ironic is applied to historical events does finally depend upon a governing faith or world view."(170)

As we have seen, Niebuhr believes that an ironic interpretation of history is the normative one for the Biblical faith. It is also, he believes, the one which most adequately illuminates the contemporary historical situation. Niebuhr does not tell us that his efforts to understand the ironic element in contemporary events led him to conclude that this view was normative for the Biblical faith. Neither does he say that this view of irony was achieved by independent Biblical research which then provided him with the key he needed for interpreting contemporary history. What is clear is the dynamic interplay between Biblical faith and contemporary history in Niebuhr's thought. This, as we have seen elsewhere in this chapter, is an essential part of his method. It is as he allows the Biblical tradition and the contemporary situation to interact, that his ironic mode of interpretation emerges. The credibility of this mode is then tested in the crucible of contemporary events. An instance of this testing process is Niebuhr's article "The Social Myths in the 'Cold War'".

Niebuhr's article on the 'Cold War' illustrates one of his basic criteria of verification. That criterion is that the credibility of a particular interpretation of history must be evident quite apart from the presuppositions which gave rise to it. It is possible to follow the argument of that article without knowing that Niebuhr's understanding of irony has Biblical roots. Nowhere in the article does he suggest that the truth of his analysis

depends on the acceptance of his presuppositions. The analysis is allowed to stand on its own, without Biblical authority being called into bolster it. There is no mention of a transcendent God "who laughs at human pretensions without being hostile to human aspirations." Yet, as we have seen, all these are important features of Niebuhr's understanding of irony.

Niebuhr's analysis of irony appears to have an apologetic interest also in that he believes the ironic element in contemporary history validates the Christian view of man. He is no more concerned in an article for a secular journal, however, to persuade men to accept the Christian view of man than to accept his theological presuppositions. It is possible, therefore, to accept Niebuhr's analysis of the 'Cold War' without accepting his Christian view of man.

Stone has argued that Niebuhr's use of irony is not theological in any special sense. He writes

> "Even in Niebuhr's special use of irony, it is not particularly a theological concept. Niebuhr relates it to his theology, however, and claims that it is the normative way for the Christian to view history."(171)

If by the use of the word "relates" Stone means that Niebuhr allows the interplay between contemporary events and the Biblical - Christian faith to create his ironic mode of interpretation, we would be in substantial agreement with him. We are not sure, however, that this is what Stone means. For it is not evident from his book, perhaps because this is not its purpose, that he gives much attention to Niebuhr's theological method. It is difficult to uphold Stone's claim that Niebuhr's use of irony is not "particularly a theological concept" when viewed against the final chapter of Niebuhr's The Irony of American History. It is in this chapter that Niebuhr tackles the problem of validation of irony as a theological concept. True, Niebuhr does not make exclusive claims for irony as a theological mode of interpreting history. But he does argue that the theological presuppositions upon which his understanding of irony is based lead him to believe that this mode of interpreting history is finally viable. As he says:

> "Elements of irony, tragedy or pathos may, of course be detected in life and history without any guiding principle of interpretation...

> But a basic faith or ultimate presupposition of meaning will determine which of these three categories is regarded as the most significant frame of meaning for the interpretation of life as a whole..."(172)

While not agreeing with Stone, it is not difficult to understand his judgement about Niebuhr's use of irony. For while Niebuhr's theological method seems to allow the interplay between theology and history to shape his criteria for social choice, this is hardly ever made explicit. We will have occasion to return to this feature of his method in the next chapter. At this stage our sympathy with Stone's judgement arises from the fact that it is possible to agree with Niebuhr's analysis of a particular situation without accepting his theological presuppositions. It is possible, furthermore, to agree with him without knowing what these presuppositions are, or that he in fact had any. His analysis of the 'Cold War' situation, in our view, is a case in point.

This feature of Niebuhr's method can lead to misunderstanding. It also raises real problems. As Niebuhr himself pointed out, politicians agreed with his analysis of the human situation in his Gifford Lectures whilst being careful to add the qualification that this did not necessarily include their acceptance of his theological presuppositions.(173) Niebuhr believed that the crisis in contemporary history was so great that being theologically acceptable was less important than making a contribution to the alleviation of the crisis. Bingham quotes Niebuhr as saying: "The crisis of the time is too great for me to be a theologian."(174) He would therefore presumably not quibble about whether his use of irony was theological or not. But to anyone seeking to understand the man and his method the issue is important.

It may well be possible to make an ironic analysis of a situation without explicit reference to theological presuppositions. The question, however, is not one of reference but of <u>presence</u>. Is it possible to make such an analysis without <u>theological</u> presuppositions? If so, what is the essential function of the theological presuppositions? To put the issue another way, Niebuhr's definition of irony is constructed in such a way as to lead the reader to believe that a transcendent God is integral to an ironic interpretation of history. His view of irony is theological in this sense. Politicians and historians may agree

with his ironic interpretation and yet part company with him on his views about the transcendent. That Niebuhr is open to this kind of interpretation is, on his own admission, clear. His answer is that in the final analysis meaningful existence is possible, on the Christian interpretation, only where there is faith in a transcendent source of life. To give rational expression to that faith, in any ultimate sense, is impossible.

If, as Niebuhr argued, the ultimate problem for myth is the problem of God, the ultimate problem for an ironic view is also the problem of God. Niebuhr's answer in relation to irony is not unlike the one he gave in relation to myth. He argued that myth is a way of expressing the transcendent source and centre of the meaning of life. Myth expresses the conviction that existence is meaningful, and occurs wherever that conviction is held. In regard to irony, he argues that an ironic view is normative because it expresses the scope and limits of human freedom (in much the same way as myth does) as understood in Christian faith. But irony is normative for other reasons too:

> "The Christian preference for an ironic interpretation is derived not merely from its conception of the nature of human freedom, according to which man's transcendence over Nature endows him with creative possibilities which are, however, not safe against abuse and corruption. It is also derived from its faith that life has a centre and source of meaning beyond the natural and social sequences which may be rationally discerned. This divine source and centre must be discerned by faith because it is enveloped in mystery, though being the basis of meaning. So discerned, it yields a frame of meaning in which human freedom is real and valid and not merely tragic or illusory."(175)

Some Criticisms.

The emergence of an ironic view of history, as a mode of interpretation, signalled a more positive estimate of man than can be discerned in his earlier writings. This is due partly to the historical context in which he wrote The Irony of American History, and partly to the content which Niebuhr gave to the concept of irony. Niebuhr's colleague at Union, John Bennett, believes that by 1946 the changes in Niebuhr's thought were clarified, and singles out "openness" as the most significant feature of this change. Bennett writes: "I think that openness

to the possible uniqueness of each historical situation is the new element in his thought which is most important."(176) The success of the New Deal and the Fair Deal policies in the United States in bringing about creative change through piecemeal and experimental means impressed Niebuhr greatly, according to Bennett. In justification of this view, he draws attention to an editorial Niebuhr wrote in 1951 in which he acclaims evidence which had just been published indicating that greater equality had been achieved in the distribution of incomes in the States during the period 1929 - 1946. Niebuhr concludes the editorial by saying: "Surely this is a very considerable revolution. It may be more drastic in its consequences than some more advertised revolutions in Europe."(177)

Ronald Stone also believes that Niebuhr's concept of irony inclines him to a more positive estimate of man. He summarizes the development of Niebuhr's thought in this way:

> "The Christian view of history is not tragic because it is not necessary that man do evil. He can choose the good, but in his pride he does not. The development of the concept of irony inclined Niebuhr away from the more pessimistic notes of his Marxist or Christian realist writings..."(178)

Further evidence for Niebuhr's view that man "can choose the good" is given in his <u>The Self and the Dramas of History</u>, in which he develops the view that man is both "creature" and "creator". He argues that a synthesis between the Hellenic view of man and the Biblical view is necessary for an adequate understanding of man's nature and his community:

> "Modern history... has, in short, been a dramatic encounter between the Biblical-Hebraic and the Hellenic components of our culture in which the emergence of dynamic factors of a technical civilization gave a new dimension to the ancient encounter.
>
> The dialectical tension between the two components in our culture was rooted in the fact that each was capable of realizing some facts of human existence and tended to be blind to others. The Hebraic saw history as a drama and the Hellenic looked for the structures which underlie the flow of history. The Hebraic was conscious of the organic aspects of human community while the Hellenic discerned the elements of artifact which had been introduced into the community by human contrivance. The Hebraic had a sense of divine providence as ruling over history because it was conscious of the creatureliness of man in the

> Process. Modernized Hellenism was so conscious of the role of man as creator that it became defective in the sense of providence and alternated between an excessive determinism and an excessive voluntarism."(179)

Granted that with the development of an ironic mode of interpreting history Niebuhr was able to give greater emphasis to man as creator, our problem with this mode is that it is by its very nature designed to underline man's creatureliness. Irony, in the hands of Niebuhr, is the tool shaped by the artist-observer to enable him to root out man's pretensions. Irony is the mode which enables Niebuhr to elucidate those situations in history where man has exceeded the bounds of his creatureliness; for this is what he means by 'pretensions'. Niebuhr is still closer to pessimism than he is to optimism. His use of irony, as Stone says, inclines him to a less pessimistic view of man. He is less pessimistic rather than more optimistic. This is due partly to the nature of irony, and partly to Niebuhr's conviction that history remains fragmentary to the end. As he says, "the chief issue between the two components (Biblical-Hebraic and Hellenic) develops on the issue of the realization of the potentialities of history. The Biblical faith accepts the fact that historical meanings and fulfillments remain fragmentary to the end of history." We must, he continues, "rely upon Biblical faith to encourage the modesty and patience which will prevent present tensions from becoming catastrophic (because there are those who) are trying to bring history to a premature conclusion."(180)

The disclosure of an ironic situation in history can lead to "contrition". By contrition Niebuhr means the "abatement" of the pretensions which gave rise to the ironic situation. However, the disclosure of irony may also lead to the heightening of the pretensions which gave rise to it. In either case, irony is concerned to disclose pretensions, and is therefore a negative instrument designed to point up excesses. One cannot help the feeling that in the face of an ironic view all one can do is have a 'sober estimate of oneself'. It is, we believe, one of Niebuhr's greatest achievements that he elaborated the dimensions of such a sober estimate, and drew the boundaries of man's freedom in terms relevant to the contemporary situation.

A rejoinder to the above comment could be that it was precisely Niebuhr's concern for relevance in the contemporary

situation that forced him to take an ironic view. Irony, it may be argued, is the tool of a realist to be wielded against the strong in their strength. As we have seen, in his analysis of the 'Cold War' situation, Niebuhr was concerned that the 'super-powers' should be responsible, for the fate of the world depended on this. Irony, it may further be argued, is the tool of a realist to be used in relating to men and nations in positions of responsibility. For it is the means by which responsibility can be clearly defined, as well as the means by which sanctions can be brought to bear on the pretensions of the strong. Irony is strong food meted out to the strong. The post World War Two situation, and Niebuhr's deep involvement in it, would seem to corroborate this view. In an age of unprecedented danger, symbolized by nuclear weapons, Niebuhr stressed the need for responsible action on a personal and on a collective level. Bingham quotes Niebuhr as saying: "We are never the prisoners of historical destiny even though all pretensions of being its master have crumbled."(181) Irony is the tool designed to help the crumbling of pretensions.

Irony may help keep the picture of man's creatureliness in focus. One may ask, however, whether it is of help to those who are tempted to despair rather than pretension. One may ask, for example, whether an ironic view would have helped those involved in the founding of the trade union movement in the United States? The struggle of the worker to achieve a more equitable balance of power in industrial relations in the United States is, Niebuhr acknowledges, one of the basic achievements of democracy - perhaps even one of the factors which produced the democratic nation-state.(182) In the struggle for a tolerable equilibrium of power on the part of the workers, it is doubtful whether an ironic view would have been of much help. Their's were not problems of 'pretension' and of exceeding the limits of their creatureliness. On the contrary, they needed to affirm their dignity as men and their solidarity as workers in the process of achieving a more equal distribution of power. A strong, mature trades union movement may legitimately become the focus of an ironic interpretation. But when Niebuhr himself was involved in the struggle of the workers in Detroit, however, it was not with irony that he worked. Not long after he left Detroit he described his position as an "effort" to "combine political radicalism with a more classical and historical interpretation of religion."(183)

We now know that the synthesis between "a more radical political orientation" and "more conservative religious convictions" which he was feeling after in his formative years, finally took the form of a Christian realism which combined the insights of the Biblical and classical traditions with a liberal pragmatic political approach. The insights of the Biblical and classical Christian traditions led Niebuhr, in his later years, to believe that "it is necessary to draw constantly on the insights of Biblical faith, particularly in an age in which human achievements are great; and illusions threaten to be as great as the achievements."(184) His realism, and his liberal pragmatic approach, were the result of the insights he gained from the Biblical and classical Christian tradition, but they were also the result of his capacity to read off from history lessons which changed his perspective. The mature role into which the United States had been forced, during the course of his own lifetime, in international politics, to a large extent caused his change in perspective. "We shivered on the brink of world responsibility", said Niebuhr, in 1960, "until history pushed us in."(185) To help the nation bear this responsibility, Niebuhr, it may be argued, used irony as a means of allowing the insights of Biblical faith to expose dangers inherent in responsibility.

If irony was the weapon he used in a democratic society which had achieved a high level of technological advance, a tolerable balance of power, and a more equal distribution of wealth, Niebuhr never lost his sympathy for those who were in the process of achieving these ends. Americans, Niebuhr argued, must never lose sight of the process by which their society had evolved, nor must they think that it can be packed and exported to undeveloped countries. The political utopianism and political radicalism of undeveloped nations needs understanding, urged Niebuhr, because "Utopia seems a plausible goal to the peoples who have never experienced the torturous processes of history except in terms of expectation." While it is true, he argued, that "the independence of a nation is no guarantee of justice within the nation", Americans should understand the factors which motivate the demand for independence in developing nations. Furthermore, Bingham draws our attention to something Niebuhr wrote after the Second World War: "We defined democracy in such a way as to make it suitable for our luxurious circumstances" and so forgot that "a minimum of social health is a presupposition of democratic

life" and "assumed that if only (people) guard freedom, community will take care of itself." Democracy so defined, says Bingham in summarizing Niebuhr's argument, was not suitable "for the poverty of either war-torn Europe or the new nations emerging from the crumbling of the erstwhile European empires."(186)

It is our contention that irony, as defined by Niebuhr, is not suitable in those situations which do not enjoy a "minimum of social health" and where there are those who are in the midst of the torturous struggle to achieve social health. One can understand the impatience of those who are involved in the struggle for social justice, and wield the weapon of irony against either the United States or the Soviet Union when they try to foist their brand of political domestic product onto emerging nations or communities. It is doubtful, however, whether an ironic view of history can provide strength to the weak who are struggling to achieve social justice.

There are those who have criticized the Niebuhr of the fifties as conservative. One critic is quite outspoken in this view: "Niebuhr is again reflecting the mood of his times. In the effervescent twenties, he was an optimist, in the marxist thirties he was a radical, and now in the fat fifties he's just another middle of the roader."(187) Niebuhr's ironic view of history, and his pragmatic approach, are the main reasons why he has been labelled 'conservative'. But it is a label which does not fit Niebuhr well. Those who level this criticism at Niebuhr do not understand that he used irony, and adopted a pragmatic approach to political problems in the fifties, because of his Christian realism. It was this realism which led him to believe that, whilst pragmatism is a limited instrument, it is a necessary one because "the human situation is partly subject to remedy and partly not."(188) It was this same realism which led him to believe that irony is necessary because men will not recognize this essential feature of the human situation. Those who criticize niebuhr for being conservative do not understand the dialectic tension between history and faith in his life. It is just not true that Niebuhr ever simply reflected the mood of his times. His Christian realism, of which irony was a tool, led him to believe that democracy was a "method of finding proximate solutions for insoluble problems."(189) If this makes him

conservative, then Niebuhr is happy to accept this label. In reply to Bennett's raising of the issue of conservatism Niebuhr says: "My conservatism relates to an increasing appreciation of the organic factors in social life", but, he adds, it is not a "conservatism which is merely interested in the preservation of some status quo" for this "would be anathema for anyone who had drawn inspiration from the Old Testament prophets."(190) Our criticism of Niebuhr's use of irony is not that it is conservative but that it illustrates Niebuhr's basic pessimism about man's nature and prevents him from being able to delineate the dimensions of man's creativity with the same depth that he was able to delineate the dimensions of man's creatureliness. His inability to do this is, we believe, a problem which relates directly to his theological method.

Chapter Five

'ADEQUACY' AND BEYOND

'Adequacy' as a principle of verification in Niebuhr's theological method. Niebuhr's paradoxical relationship to our age: the aspects of science and technology absent from that contemporary history with which his tradition interacts.

The theological groundwork for the apologetic and ethical task. Niebuhr's theological presuppositions examined by means of a paradigmatic treatment of his theology: 'God as the symbol of Mystery and Meaning' - 'Human history contains Encounters between God and Man'. These presuppositions considered in relation to his 'adequacy' principle of verification.

The promise of Niebuhr's theological method. A discussion of his work as ethicist and as an apologist.

Some questions about Niebuhr's notion of 'faith' considered. A critique of some aspects of Niebuhr's estimate of contemporary experience, and of the biblical-Christian tradition, including some proposals towards fuller adequation.

CHAPTER FIVE

"ADEQUACY" AND BEYOND: THE PROMISE AND THE LIMITS OF NIEBUHR'S THEOLOGICAL METHOD

The editors of the Living Library Volume on Niebuhr began their Preface by saying: "The dominant motif of our age, as Alfred North Whitehead has pointed out, is science, and two characteristics associated with the scientific mentality are change and specialization. Such an age demands, of anyone who would interpret and criticize its methods and goals, discernment and comprehensiveness. Reinhold Niebuhr, writing and speaking from the religous point of view and as an American, has exhibited these qualities and has performed this service for almost half a century." (1)

(1) NIEBUHR'S PARADOXICAL RELATIONSHIP TO OUR AGE

Few would disagree with the sentiments expressed by Kegley and Bretall in their assessment of Niebuhr. Yet there is something strangely paradoxical about Niebuhr's relationship to this so-called 'scientific age'. The dramatic changes brought about by this process of industrialization in the United States, the crises precipitated by the two World Wars, the emergence of America as a 'super-power', the rise of Communism as a world force, and the struggle for independence on the part of developing nations in the Third World are among some of the changes which are reflected in Niebuhr's own development. His changing perspectives both in theology and in ethics, are largely the result of his efforts to wrestle with the issues of contemporary history. It is one of Niebuhr's outstanding characteristics that he had the 'courage to change'. For this reason alone he demands to be interpreted and his work evaluated.

What is strangely paradoxical about Niebuhr, however, is that for all his discernment and comprehensiveness in dealing with the enormous social and political issues of our age, he seems to give little weight to the issues raised by science and technology. He seemed not to be able to credit these instruments

of man's dealings with the natural order with the same signific-ance that he saw in political and social problems. For example, his latest book, Faith and Politics,[2] is a collection of essays covering a period from 1930 to 1968. It bears the subtitle: "A Commentary on Religious, Social, and Political Thought in a Technological Age." The reference to "a Technological Age" in the sub-title is somewhat misleading. The book is about contemporary religious, social, and political issues. The issues raised specifically by modern technology are not the subject of the book. The only significant reference to the problems of technology occurs in an essay in which Niebuhr is concerned to make the point that we have failed to achieve a just society in the situation which a "technical civilization has created."[3] It may be argued that since Niebuhr has described himself as a "political and social philosopher teaching Christian ethics"[4] it is unfair to expect him to deal with the ethical issue raised specifically by modern technology. Our response is that the problems arising from specific fields of scientific discovery have political and social implications which no Christian ethic can ignore. The ethics of genetic control, the ethics of ecology, and the issues raised by modern cybernetics, are among the fundamental issues of our technological age. As such they have political and social implications. This failure is strange in one who began his life under the shadow of the assembly line.

The roots of this paradoxical feature of Niebuhr's thought lie in his theological method. He is open to the criticism which Ian Barbour has levelled at much contemporary theology:

> "Most contemporary theological works say very little about nature. Discussions of providence, for example, refer extensively to God's activity in history but are silent about his activity in nature. ... Is a sharp distinction between history and nature tenable, if nature itself has a history and if man is rooted in nature? In neo-orthodoxy, nature is the unredeemed setting for man's redemption; but has God as Creator done so little to anticipate his work as Redeemer that the realm of nature is completely separate from the realm of grace?
>
> ... from the scientific side, a new view of nature forces us to re-examine our ideas of God's relation to the world. Tradition pictured a static world, created initially in its present form. ... Today, the dynamic and temporal character of a growing evolving universe (of which biological evolution

> is only one facet) must be taken seriously in theology." (5)

The discernment and comprehensiveness with which the editors of the Living Library Volume have credited Niebuhr are not in question. However, one of the enigmatic features of Niebuhr's thought is his failure to discern the aspects of the scientific age to which Barbour refers. A dynamic view of nature is one such aspect. In this regard Niebuhr reflects his kinship with neo-orthodoxy; a kinship which he has in fact acknowledged.(6)

Niebuhr gives us a clue as to why neo-orthodoxy was unable to evolve a 'theology of nature' when discussing the response of religion to nineteenth-century evolutionary science. He makes the point that the resolution of the controversy led to a clarification of roles on the part of science and religion, and establishing of a 'necessary partnership' between them.

> " ... the nineteenth-century Darwinian controversy established the necessary partnership between religious-mythical pointers to the mystery of creation and an empirical account of the evolutionary stream in the realm of natural causation." (7)

While recognizing that generalizations about neo-orthodoxy can easily become caricature, it can be argued that the response of neo-orthodoxy to the challenge from twentieth-century science was to further clarify the role of theology and leave the realm of nature to the scientists. Langdon Gilkey, who acknowledges his indebtedness to neo-orthodoxy, gives a critical appraisal of this position. He writes:

> " ... the neo-orthodox were conspicuously indifferent to scientific theories and hostile to any of their theological implications ... To be sure, none of them ever doubted evolution as a biological theory ... nor did they dream of questioning the legitimacy, say, of archaeological or historical studies of the Biblical periods. On the other hand, none of them considered using the biological theory of evolution as the basis for a theological concept of creation or providence ...
>
> On the whole, the neo-orthodox pictured themselves as writing theology from the faithful study of scripture and of church tradition in correlation with their own personal, existential, and ethical experience ..." (8)

Gilkey's characterization of neo-orthodoxy as a complete separation between science and religion, however true it may be in general, is not altogether fair as a description of Niebuhr's position. Here we face another enigmatic feature of his thought. His explicit statements of position (as for example in his essay "Coherence, Incoherence, and the Christian Faith") do lend credence to Gilkey's characterization. He does argue for a radical dichotomy between the world of nature and the world of human history. He does not use the biological theory of evolution as a basis for a theological concept of creation. His theology was not, however, written from the "faithful study of scripture and church tradition". He stood in a tradition nurtured by the insights of the Biblical and classical Christian heritage. But he also sought to take history seriously. He, perhaps more than, say, Barth or Bultmann, sought to allow the interplay between the tradition in which he stood and contemporary history and the social sciences to shape his theology. The enigma here is that whereas his life bears testimony to his capacity to allow the tradition in which he stood to be tested and modified by contemporary history, his explicit statements allow for no such interplay and therefore lend credence to criticisms of the kind Gilkey makes. And further, the aspects of science and technology seem to be sadly absent from that contemporary history with which his tradition interacts.

Niebuhr's passion for social justice, and his whole approach to apologetics are perhaps the most important reasons why the neo-orthodox label does not fit him well. In spite of his acceptance of this label, it is not merely a "correlation" between insights from "scripture and church tradition" and "personal, existential, and ethical experience" which shape his theology. He stands in the tradition of the Hebrew prophets because his is an ethical and religious passion, rather than a concern for rational consistency. The process through which his thinking passed is in some sense analagous to his description of 'Hebraic religion'. He says, the "purifying process in the Hebraic religion through which it arrived at a pure monotheism was dominated by an ethico-religious passion rather than a rational urge for consistency." (9) The data of contemporary history provided the abrasive for the process of purification during his 'torturous pilgrimage' towards the position he describes as Christian Realism. For reasons which we must explore

more fully later, data from contemporary science and technology contributed very little.

His ethical and apologetic pursuits are dominated by a concern to penetrate what he saw to be the chief maladies of our time: the 'soft utopianism' of a liberal culture, and the 'hard utopianism' of the Communist creed. Both these maladies, he believed, had religious overtones. In his Intellectural Autobiography he describes the ethical and apologetic task in these words: "Any encounter with the essential religion of a secular age must penetrate through the confusions which have been created by equating history with nature and meaning with rational intelligibility, and implicit though highly questionable dogmas with the prestige of science. The fact that the Communists should adorn their more explicit dogma with the prestige of science provides modern liberal culture with a caricature of its own beliefs." (10) By refuting the error contained in these modern estimates of man, Niebuhr believed that men may be led to affirm the Christian faith which provides a radical alternative. In other words, the apologetic task as he saw it was to take contemporary history seriously, and to provide an analysis of the errors contained in the modern estimates of man, before it can proclaim the estimate of man contained in the Christian faith. He is well aware that the refutation of one set of presuppositions about man does not compel acceptance of the Christian alternative. But neither does he believe that men will be led to accept the Christian alternative unless the errors in modern views of man are exposed.

It is our purpose in this chapter to explore the promise and the limits of Niebuhr's theological method. It is our view that the religious perspective from which he sought to interpret and criticize our 'scientific age' was itself the product of a long and 'torturous' inter-action with some of the dominant features of the age. In that process his religious perspective was both clarified and modified. Clarified, in the sense that he remained convinced that a religious motif is indispensible. Modified, in the sense that he acknowledged the impact of a scientific and secular culture, and recognized that a religious perspective would have to be validated if its resources were to be relevant in that culture. In what was

probably the last Preface he wrote, for Faith and Politics, Niebuhr summarizes the twin concerns which pre-occupied him throughout his life:

> " ... (these essays) reveal a unity in that they attempt to establish the relevance of the Christian faith to the contemporary political and ethical issues.
>
> My ... purpose (in the Preface) is to explain, or perhaps justify, the contrasting method in two of the major themes of these essays. The one theme is to validate the resources of the biblical faith by applying its moral imperatives and its law of love, enjoining responsibility for the neighbour's welfare in a technical age. Today, social responsibilities must be guided by norms derived from all moral and empirical disciplines. A sacred text or a religiously sanctified tradition of past ages are inadequate guides to the ever-changing human relations of a secular culture.
>
> The second theme is an explanation of the vitality of religious life in an age which expected the death of religion ... The reason for this vitality is that religious faith is an expression of trust in the meaning of human existence despite all the cross-purposes, incongruities, and ills in nature and history." (11)

A careful reading of this statement reveals his strangely paradoxical relationship to our age. We have already pointed to the lack of any comprehensive treatment of the ethical issues arising specifically out of modern technology, and have made some preliminary suggestions as to why this is so. On the other hand, he is remarkably in tune with our age in his pre-occupation with the problems of verification - problems that are characteristic of the scientific age. One of the main concerns throughout his life was to find ways of validating the insights of the Christian faith. He does this by showing that the insights of the Faith are relevant to contemporary issues. We will elaborate this aspect of Niebuhr's thought later.

Niebuhr argued that the resources of the Christian faith, in their moral application, are more adequate than those derived from other sources in encountering the problems of our time. The criterion by which the resources of the faith are validated is their adequacy to deal with these problems. The truth of the Christian faith derives its authority, contrary to Gilkey's

assertion, not from its sources in a "sacred text" (scripture, in Gilkey's argument) or in a "religiously sanctified tradition" (church tradition, according to Gilkey). However important these sources may be to those who stand in the same tradition as Niebuhr does, the authority of that tradition in encounter with modern culture does not lie in its religious character. According to Niebuhr, it is validated by its relevance and adequacy, not by religious sanction. It is true because it offers an adequate alternative to the dilemmas facing modern man. Its truth lies in its relevance to contemporary issues. The truth of the Christian faith, according to Niebuhr, derives its authority from the fact that an analysis of the contemporary situation proves that its resources are more adequate to deal with these issues than are modern alternatives.

What we have said about the adequacy of the Christian faith does not mean that for Niebuhr modern resources are irrelevant. On the contrary, he argues that the resources of the Faith are in themselves inadequate - "social responsibilities must be guided by norms derived from all moral and empirical disciplines."

The picture that emerges from Niebuhr's statement of position would seem to indicate that the resources of the Faith and the best insights from all "moral and empirical disciplines" <u>together</u> form the norms from which men may find guidance in their social responsibilities. There is in this position evidence of what Bingham has described as a 'nonchalance of faith' on Niebuhr's part, and also a humility in the face of the massive responsibilities which must be shouldered in our contemporary world.

Niebuhr's capacity to allow the data of experience to interact with the tradition in which he stood, and his willingness to work with the best insights in moral and empirical disciplines - whether they matched his presuppositions or not, is we believe what makes his theological method so full of promise. This capacity is what we described in Chapter Three as his 'adequacy principle'. It is this principle by which he sought to validate the truth of the Christian faith. His employment of it is what makes his method worthy of careful evaluation.

What we have described as his 'adequacy principle' makes the neo-orthodox label fit Niebuhr none-too-easily. His primary concern was to offer men norms by which they may be guided in their social responsibilities. A theology which fails this test becomes the object of criticism. In 1960 he in fact criticized neo-orthodoxy on this ground. In an article for the Christian Century series "How My Mind Has Changed In the Last Ten Years", Neibuhr wrote: "When I find neo-orthodoxy turning into sterile orthodoxy or a new Scholasticism, I find that I am a liberal at heart, and that many of my broadsides at liberalism were indiscriminate." (12)

Students of Niebuhr will be forgiven if they are bewildered by his capacity to change his mind. But, as the above 'confession' indicates, he found any position intolerable which was morally irrelevant. About the same time that he made this statement about neo-orthodoxy, he specifically attacked Karl Barth for being morally irrelevant. In the context of his controversy with Barth over the Hungarian rebellion in 1956, he writes:

> "Barth ... is certainly not a 'primitive anti-communist' nor a 'secret pro-communist'. He is merely a very eminent theologian, trying desperately to be impartial in his judgements. The price of this desperation is of course moral irrelevance." (13)

The promise of Niebuhr's theological method is that he sought to expound the Christian faith in terms that were morally relevant to contemporary life. A major factor in his partial failure to fulfil this promise arises from the exclusion of science and technology. It is this failure, rather than any vestiges of neo-orthodoxy, which lays him open to the charge of moral irrelevance in his time. His 'uneasy dualism' between the world of nature and the world of human history gives rise to a reservation about his theology, when judged by his own criterion of moral relevance. We refer, here, to his inability to deal sympathetically with the ethical issues of a technological society.

We must turn now to a detailed analysis of Niebuhr's theological method. We will construct a paradigm of his method, drawn from his explicit statements of position, and

concentrating our attention on his method of verification which we have previously called the 'principle of adequacy'. This pardigm will then be subjected to a critical analysis. In our final section we will seek to move beyond adequacy towards adequation, building on the foundations laid by Niebuhr and attempting to incorporate our correctives to deficiencies evident in his method.

A preliminary statement of what we understand by "Adequation" seems necessary at this point. When the reality I experience is resonant with the truth of my tradition, that is adequation. Adequation cannot occur when an essential part of the reality I experience finds no corresponding cord in my biblical-Christian tradition. Neither is there adequation when essential parts of my biblical-Christian tradition fail to resonate with my contemporary experience. Adequation, then, is a two-way process. Where there is a failure of adequation we are left on the one hand without criteria for social choice, and on the other with a dogmatism which does not enjoy verification in experience. That is to say, where there is no adequation between faith and experience, aspects of either that faith or that experience are muted. There are in Niebuhr's theology jarring notes which make it difficult for a child of the twentieth century to accept that theology because it fails to relate in important aspects to his total experience. The atrophying of the biblical doctrines of Creation and Resurrection under Niebuhr's hand surely result from his failure to take nature seriously, and this leaves him without criteria in dealing with science and technology.

(2) "ADEQUACY" AS A PRINCIPLE OF VERIFICATION IN NIEBUHR'S METHOD

Any attempt at a systematic treatment of Niebuhr's theology is hazardous. He has repeatedly expressed his hesitation about being called a theologian. He has repeatedly stated that his prime purpose is to apply insights gained from the Biblical and Christian heritage to the issues facing contemporary man. Apart from the dialectical nature of his thought, which itself makes any systematic treatment of Niebuhr

difficult, he seldom ventures into an explicit statement of his theological presuppositions. One of the difficulties confronting anyone who would understand Niebuhr's thought is due to the hiddenness of his presuppositions. This difficulty has been noted by his brother, Richard, who says: "Reinie's thought appears to me to be like a great iceberg of which three-fourths or more is beneath the surface and in which what's expressly said depends on something that is not made explicit." (14) While no exposition of Niebuhr's thought can avoid the hazards inherent in systematic treatment, no exposition of his thought can be adequate which does not attempt to get at the three-fourths of the iceberg.

We will now proceed to construct the paradigm of Niebuhr's theology and examine how he sought to validate it. It must be admitted that 'the eye of the beholder' will play a larger part in this construct because of the unsystematic nature of his writings. Yet the task must be undertaken, and we will strive to be faithful as may be to the explicit in our search for the implicit.

Our paradigmatic treatment of Niebuhr's theology will be based, in part, on the following works: two sermonic essays on "Mystery and Meaning", one published in 1946 and the other in 1958; essays on "Optimism, Pessimism and Religious Faith" (1953), "Coherence, Incoherence, and Christian Faith" (1953), "Freedom" (1958), and "Faith as the Sense of Meaning in Human Existence" (1966). It is in these works that Niebuhr's theological position becomes explicit.

There are, we believe, two major presuppositions in Niebuhr's theology. One is his view that God is the ultimate symbol of mystery and meaning. The other is his view that human history contains encounters between God and man. These presuppositions are themselves the product of Niebuhr's 'torturous pilgrimage'.

(a) God Is The Symbol Of Mystery And Meaning

Whilst Niebuhr concedes that there is ultimately no way

in which belief in a transcendent God can be validated rationally, he would argue that human existence is incomprehensible without such a belief. Such belief endows human existence with meaning, and defines the limits of any attempt to make reason the principle of coherence and meaning. In his reply to the 'death of God' theologians Altizer and Hamilton, Niebuhr indicates his understanding of the concepts "mystery" and "meaning", and the nature of religious language:

> "The younger theologians who cheerfully, even blatantly, announced their discovery that 'God is dead' do not seem to realize that all religious affirmations are an expression of a sense of meaning and that a penumbra of mystery surrounds every realm of meaning. Religious affirmations avail themselves of symbols and myths, which express both trust in the meaning of life and an awareness of the mystery of the unknowable that surrounds every realm of meaning." (15)

It is never easy to think and write clearly about God. "Now we see through a glass darkly; but then face to face" (1 Corinthians 13:12), is the Pauline text upon which Niebuhr bases his two sermonic essays on "Mystery and Meaning". A genuine Christian faith, for Niebuhr, "must move between those who claim to know so much about the natural world that it ceases to point to any mystery beyond itself and those who claim to know so much about the 'unseen' world that all reverence for its secret and hidden character is dissipated." (16) "Those who claim to know so much about the natural world," are the various philosophers - ancient and modern, who acknowledge mystery provisionally but who expect to reduce it to rational coherence, or regard mystery as residual ignorance which the progress of modern science will eliminate. "Those who claim to know so much about the 'unseen' world", are the theologians in both the Catholic and Protestant traditions who seek to create elaborate rational theological systems in which the mystery of God and man is dissolved too simply.

For Niebuhr, God is the symbol of mystery and meaning. This does not mean that we must **not** use our reason to the full in comprehending that mystery and that meaning. Mystery is not equal to ignorance. But neither must we think that reason resolves the mystery of life or fully comprehends its meaning.

"A genuine faith", argues Niebuhr, "resolves the mystery of life by the mystery of God ... Faith in God is faith in some ultimate unity of life, in some final comprehensive purpose which holds all the various, and frequently contradictory, realms of coherence and meaning together." (17) This does not mean, however, that this source of mystery and meaning must be marked with a mysterious "x" about which little can be said or known. Niebuhr often quotes Whitehead in support of his argument about the limits of rationality, and refers to Whitehead's analysis of the relationship of the temporal process to ultimate reality, in which he posits a 'primordial God'. "It believes that God has made Himself known. It believes that He has spoken through the prophets and finally in His Son. It accepts the revelation in Christ as the ultimate clue to the mystery of God's nature and purpose in the world, particularly the mystery of the relation of His justice to His mercy. But these clues to the mystery do not eliminate the periphery of mystery. God remains <u>deus absconditus</u>." (18)

Before the mystery of God humility is essential. The 'clues' to that mystery can only be expressed in mythical and symbolic terms. Although these modes of expression may be regarded as 'primitive' by modern culture, Niebuhr believes that we must "be reconciled to the fact that all religions, particularly historically oriented faiths, must avail themselves of symbols, metaphors, and myths to point to the trasncendent sources of meaning in the flux of the temporal and phenomenal reality." He continues:

> "The custodians of the ark of faith must not be too ashamed of these metaphors; but they must not be too literalistic in defending their faith against all the empirical disciplines fortunately available in our pluralistic culture.
>
> Ideally, a partnership between the guardians of faith and the secular disciplines will prevent extravagant errors of both partners. The guardians of the faith will be saved from literalistic and obscurantist fallacies, which are the vices of all moribund religious traditions. But expressions of basic trust, though their symbols may be regarded as 'primitive' ... will prevent the elimination of all interest in ultimate meanings and purposes. This empirical

> purge of culture usually results in barrenness or moral sentimentality in even the most impressive forms of humanism." (19)

These words, written by Niebuhr in response to the 'death of God' theologians, may be taken as typical of his approach to the problem of transcendence. They are characteristic of his approach in another sense also. The issue of transcendence, for Niebuhr, was never merely a philosophical one. What might be called the 'ethics of transcendence' was his primary concern. He argued that the notion of God's transcendence in Hebrew thought was arrived at through ethical insight. "Faith in a completely trasncendent God was ... their victory over polytheism and tribalism." (20) The ethical consequences of this faith Niebuhr summarizes in the following way:

> "It provided ... for both the universalism and the perfectionism which are implied in every vital ethics.
>
> ... faith in a transcendent God made it possible to affirm confidence in a meaningful existence even though the world was full of sorrow and evil ...
>
> The prophetic religion from which Christianity took its rise is therefore not an other-worldy religion. It is thoroughly this-worldy." (21)

In ethical terms, faith in a transcendent God has both a negative and a positive function. The negative function, Niebuhr expresses in this way: "Only in a religion in which there is a true sense of transcendence can we find the resource to convict every historical achievement of incompleteness, and to prevent the sanctification of the relative values of any age or era." (22) In fact he argues that "the most grievous and the most perennial sin of religion (is) the sin of using the transcendent reference to absolutize rather than to criticize the partial achievements of history," (23) and cites as an example the religious sanction given by medieval Catholicism to the feudal structure of society.

The positive function of faith in a transcendent God is, in Niebuhr's words, that "it will nerve men to exhaust all their resources in building a better world, in overcoming human strife, in mitigating the fury of man's injustice to man, and in establishing a society in which some minimal security for all

can be achieved." (24) The struggle to do this will involve men in compromise in the nicely calculated less or more which is the way we achieve justice in history. Whereas faith in a transcendent God can "nerve" men to work for such justice as it is possible to achieve, it can deteriorate into a moral idealism unrelated to the flux of history, leaving us with only pragmatic criteria for social choice. This is his major criticism of Barthianism. Moral idealism is dangerous because it draws the teeth from any consistent and historically related effort to work for justice. This happens, Niebuhr contends, when "the sense of the absolute and the transcendent becomes so complete an obsession as it is in Barthian theology" and then "all moral striving on the level of history is reduced to insignificance." (25)

If God is the symbol of mystery and meaning, how does He act in the world? In what sense is the transcendent God also the immanent God? How does Niebuhr avoid the dangers of a thorough-going dualism in which transcendence is absolutized, and religion becomes other-wordly and morally irrelevant? How on the other hand, does he avoid the dangers of monism in which an immanent God is identified with the temporal process? These problems occupied Niebuhr greatly, because he believed that the paradoxical nature of the transcendent-immanent God must be preserved. He believed that reason has always had difficulty with this paradox, and in attempting to resolve it has tended to the errors of either dualism or monism. Niebuhr's answer is to propose a radical dichotomy between the world of nature and the world of human history, and to assert that human history is the drama in which God encounters man. He believed that theology should be open to correction by every field of human knowledge. Yet the only correction that he would allow from the insights of science was a rejection of the pre-scientific understanding of nature in the Biblical world view. The radical dichotomy between nature and history, Niebuhr's 'correction' to theology was prompted therefore by his "scientific" or closed view of nature.

(1) RADICAL DICHOTOMY BETWEEN NATURE AND HISTORY

"If we take the disciplines of the various sciences

seriously, as we do, we must depart at one important point from the Biblical picture of life and history. The accumulated evidence of the natural sciences convinces us that the realm of natural causation is more closed, and less subject to divine intervention, than the biblical world view assumes." (26) Niebuhr therefore proposes that a "radical distinction between the natural world and the world of human history must be made, however much history may have a natural base." (27)

As far as we can see, there are three factors which influence Niebuhr's proposal. The first is Biblical in origin and relates to the process by which Hebraic religion arrived at its radical monotheism. The second is his understanding of science and its influence upon theology. Third is his view of the radical freedom of man, and his negative view of natural morality stemming therefrom.

(i) Radical Monotheism:

Niebuhr's roots were deeply imbedded in the Hebrew prophetic movement. He does not explicitly state that his distinction between nature and history is based on his understanding of the process by which Hebrew religion arrived at its radical monotheism. One may legitimately infer this, however, for two reasons. One is the weight he gives to that process, and its implications, in much of his writing. The other is the way he understood the myth of creation.

Niebuhr's book Christianity and Power Politics is devoted to the thesis that modern Christian and secular perfectionism, which places a "premium upon non-participation in conflict", is bad religion and bad politics. His theological essay in this book, entitled "Optimism, Pessimism, and Religious Faith" elaborates his understanding of the process by which Hebraic religion arrived at radical monotheism. (28) His analysis of that process, which we will examine below, leads him to the conclusion that a genuine faith can be neither pessimistic nor optimistic. A genuine faith, rooted in Hebraic soil, will lead to a "provisional pessimism" about the possibilities of achieving justice in society, and a "qualified optimism" which provides the impetus for social action whilst recognizing that every struggle towards justice runs the risk, at least, of

involving men in conflict.

Niebuhr's argument takes the following form. Human vitality has two primary sources: animal impulse and confidence in the meaningfulness of human existence. This confidence is "primary religion", and it is the basis of optimism. For primitive man meaningful existence was to be found in his relation to his group. This relationship usually resulted in some form of totemistic religion. This is not merely a primitive phenomenon, however. When national loyalty is reconstructed into a comprehensive religion, we witness the recrudescence of totemistic religion. (Niebuhr believes that both Marixism and Nazism are modern forms of totemism.) The "little cosmos" of the group, while it is satisfying, is not sufficient in itself. Men must relate their group to a larger group, just as they must relate themselves to the group. For this reason "animism is as primordial as totemism in the history of religion." (29) For men tried to bring the natural world into their universe of meaning from the very beginning and sought to "relate their little cosmos to a larger cosmos". However, life is not only cosmos it is also chaos and all profound religion is an attempt to embrace both these aspects of life:

> "The world is not only a cosmos but a chaos. Every universe of meaning is constantly threatened by meaninglessness. Its harmonies are disturbed by discords. Its self-sufficiency is challenged by larger and more inclusive worlds. The more men think the more they are tempted to pessimism because their thought surveys the worlds which lie beyond their little cosmos, and analyzes the chaos, death, destruction and misery which seem to deny their faith in the harmony and meaningfulness of their existence in it. All profound religion is an attempt to answer the challenge of pessimism. It seeks a centre of meaning which is able to include the totality of existence, and which is able to interpret the chaos as something which only provisionally threatens its cosmos and can ultimately be brought under its dominion." (30)

The distinctive feature of the Hebrew-Christian tradition, according to Niebuhr, is its faith in a transcendent God who is both the centre of meaning and the goal of perfection. By this faith it is able to include the totality of existence in

its world view, without ignoring the chaos which is part of that totality or allowing it to become overwhelming. By this faith pantheism is avoided, and so is totemism. This radical monotheism Niebuhr describes in this way:

> "In the Jewish-Christian tradition this problem of pessimism and optimism is solved by faith in a transcendent God who is at once the creator of the world (source of its meaning) and judge of the world (i.e. goal of its perfection). It was this faith in a transcendent God which made it possible for Hebraic religion to escape both the parochial identification of God and the nation and the pantheistic identification of God and the imperfections of historical existence." (31)

The radical monotheism of Hebraic religion is as much the product of insight as it is of experience. The process by which God was divorced from the vicissitudes of a particular nation is a compound of spiritual insight and historical experience which Niebuhr describes in these words: "the process of divorcing God from the nation was a matter of both spiritual insight and actual experience. If the early prophets had not said, as Amos, 'Are ye not as the children of the Ethiopians unto me, saith the Lord,' faith in the God of Israel might have perished with the captivity of Judah. But it was the exile which brought this process to a triumphant conclusion. A second Isaiah could build on the spiritual insights of an Amos, and could declare a God who gave meaning to existence quite independent of the vicissitudes of a nation, which had been the chief source of all meaning to the pious Jew." (32)

We may conclude, then, that God is not to be identified with nature or history, although his transcendence is not so absolute as to divorce him completely from either. Clearly, Niebuhr's radical distinction between nature and history may be attributed, in part at least, to his understanding of transcendence.

(ii) Creation And Science:

In view of Niebuhr's understanding of transcendence, what is to be said of the physical order? Niebuhr is clear that

there is no Greek-type notion of the separation of body and soul, mind and matter, in the Hebraic world view. He insists that prophetic Judaism is thoroughly 'this-worldly'. By this he means that existence in this world is meaningful. Furthermore, it "rejoices in the physical creation. 'Lord, how manifold are thy works. In wisdom hast thou made them all.'" (33) But he then (in his essay) goes on to a discussion of death, an existential problem, and one looks in vain for any attempt to expound this joy in the physical creation.

The reason for what amounts to a passing reference to the physical order in his essay, may be found in his highly symbolic treatment of the myth of creation. One cannot avoid the feeling that whereas someone steeped in prophetic Judaism may well applaud Niebuhr's interpretation of radical monotheism, he would find Niebuhr's treatment of the physical creation somewhat puzzling. His symbolic treatment of the myth of creation is the result of his attempt to reconcile the Biblical with the scientific world view. The myth of creation preserves the mystery inherent in the natural order; a mystery which Whitehead's 'primordial God' points to. But the natural order is not the realm of divine intervention which the Hebrew assumed it to be: it is a nexus of causal relations for which no divine explanation is needed, except in an ultimate sense. "The situation for faith is only slightly altered by the new (scientific) picture of a quasi-autonomous nature, created by God, not maintained by His fiat from moment to moment." (34)

The myth of creation is a statement about the value of the world, an affirmation of the meaningfulness of the world. It affirms the goodness of the created order, while preserving the mystery of that order. To say that God created the world, is to say something about value, about meaning, and about mystery. The myth of creation is a permanently valid myth because it points to the mystery and the meaning of the natural order. We may summarize Niebuhr's argument in his own words:

> "We have all accepted the scientific maxim 'Ex nihilo nihil sit' and are sceptical of every religious notion which regards the idea of creation as a substitute for the scientific analysis of causes. But there is one chink in the realm of meaning and rational

> intelligibility. That chink is the fact that no previous cause is a sufficient explanation of a subsequent event. Nothing explains the irrationality of the giveness of things ...
>
> All mystic philosophies of the Orient and in the Occident ... have partly rationalized and partly acknowledged the limits of rationality by the doctrine of 'emanation', which assumes that the temporal world is a corruption or emanation of the more primeval oneness of all things in God ... The proposition which lies at the foundation of Western life-affirmation, the doctrine of the goodness of creation, is inextricably united with the doctrine of the mystery of creation. With this mystery thought begins and ends ...
>
> ... The absurdities of the primitive myths of creation must not obscure the profundity of the permanent myth which guards the mystery of creation and sets the limits for all rational pursuits which are always in danger of finding the world self-explanatory and self-fulfilling." (35)

Science, then, must use every method at its disposal to analyse the "quasi-autonomous" natural order. In doing so it will make "obscurantist views of special acts in creation implausible" even as it will refute "orthodox conceptions of 'special providence'" to account for specific events in history.(36) The mystery to which the philosopher of science, Whitehead, points with his 'principal of concretion', and which philosophers since Aristotle have sought to comprehend with their notions of a 'first cause' or 'prime mover', is preserved in the myth of creation. Religion, especially the historical religions which do not want to identify temporality and finiteness with evil, must use mythical language to express that mystery. The myth of creation is permanently valid in that it points to the mystery in the temporal and phenomenal world, and points to the transcendent source of meaning in that world. For Niebuhr, therefore, no conflict between science and religion exists. Both are legitimate in their respective functions. In fact, "partnership" between science and religion is necessary, because in that partnership an adequate view of the world emerges. Such a view is not possible where one or other of the 'partners' is excluded.

Thus Niebuhr's distinction between nature and history is, in part, the result of his endeavour to take science seriously

while at the same time holding to what is permanently valid in the pre-scientific myth of creation. It is due in part also to his understanding of man's radical freedom.

(iii) Freedom And Natural Morality:

"The mystery of creation", writes Niebuhr, "does not impinge immediately upon our experience, and its relation to meaning, therefore, exercises (only) the minds of the most reflective persons in their most reflective moments. It becomes directly relevant to our experience only as it represents an ultimate mystery of freedom, which is related to the mystery of our freedom, ... " (37) It is not entirely clear what Niebuhr means here. It would seem that the "mystery of creation" represents the fact that the ultimate mystery is freedom. The myth of creation, for Niebuhr, seems to be exhausted by the understanding that the created order is free ('quasi-autonomous') and that man is free also ('quasi-autonomous') vis a vis the Creator. It would seem then that both the natural world and man enjoy a provisional freedom from God, while at the same time being bound to Him in some ultimate sense as Creator.

For Niebuhr, the mystery of our freedom as men takes two forms. They are "the mystery of our responsible freedom, despite the determining factors upon our life by reason of our creaturely finiteness, and the greater mystery of the corruption of that freedom and resulting sin and guilt." (38) We will elaborate later the nature of man's radical freedom, as understood by Niebuhr. For the moment we must concentrate on his argument that because man is free a distinction between nature and history is necessary. He says: "The justification for this distinction lies in the unique character of human freedom. Almost all the misinterpretations of human selfhood and the drama of history are derived from the effort to reduce human existence to the coherence of nature." (39)

As we have come to expect of Niebuhr, his justification of the view that man is radically free, which entails the distinction between nature and history, is based on the difficulties he discerns in efforts to create an ethical system based on natural morality. Any such system tends to obscure the radical freedom

of man and the dramatic character of human history. An ethic based on naturalism results in the sort of pure optimism which Huxley and Russell reacted to. An ethic based on natural law, whether Catholic or Protestant, obscures man's freedom, becomes too inflexible to meet modern ethical issues, and easily becomes the servant of reaction. As such it destroys the dialectic of prophetic religion "in which the movements of history are in one moment the instruments of God and in the next come under His condemnation." (40)

With one important exception, Niebuhr finds himself in accord with the reaction against naturalism of Huxley and Bertrand Russell. He is in accord with their distinction between the natural and human worlds. His exception is that belief in a transcendent God qualifies the pessimism which results from their distinction.

> "The simple identification of human ideals with the forces of nature inevitably gave way to a humanistic dualism in which a sharp distinction was drawn between the human and the natural world. No better definition of this dualism is given than that found in Huxley's famous Romanes lecture on Evolution and Ethics, in which he declared: 'The cosmic process has no sort of relation to moral ends; the imitation of it is inconsistent with the first principles of ethics ... The ethical progress of society depends not on imitating the cosmic process, still less in running away from it, but in combating it.' This kind of dualism is more realistic than the old type of naturalism, and it frees human moral life from slavish dependence upon the 'laws of nature'. Its general effect is to express optimism in terms of a human world of meaning and to relegate the world of nature to a realm of meaninglessness.
>
> Thus the optimism of pure naturalism degenerates into a fairly consistent pessimism, slightly relieved by a confidence in the meaningfulness of human life, even when its values must be maintained in defiance of nature's caprices. Bertrand Russell's now justly famous "Free Man's Worship is a perfect and moving expression of this pessimism. 'Brief and powerless is man's life. On him and all his race the slow sure doom sinks pitiless and dark. Blind to good and evil, omnipotent matter rolls on its relentless way. For man, condemned today to lose his dearest, tomorrow himself to pass through the gates of darkness, it remains only to cherish ere yet the blow falls, the lofty thoughts that ennoble his

> little day, proudly defiant of the irresistible forces which tolerate for a moment his knowledge and his condemnation, to sustain alone a weary and unyielding atlas, the world that his own ideals have fashioned despite the trampling march of unconscious power.' It must be said in favour of this view that if human life and human ideals are the only source of meaning in existence, it is more realistic to regard the world of nature as a 'trampling march of unconscious power' than to imagine that it exists only to support human purposes ...
>
> Yet this pessimism is not completely realistic. The world of nature is after all not as inimical to the human enterprise as this view assumes. 'Nature, the homely nurse, does all she can to make her foster child, her inmate man, forget the glories he has known and that imperial palace whence he came.' The paradoxes of classical religion, in which God is known to be revealed in the benefices of nature even though it is recognized that the processes of nature do not exhaust the final meaning of existence, are more realistic than this dualism ... " (41)

This passage, cited from his essay "Optimism, Pessimism, and Religious Faith", is part of his analysis of how extravagant ideas of optimism have themselves been countered by the more realistic views of humanists Huxley and Russell. He immediately proceeds to argue that the tragic events of modern history "have negated practically every presupposition upon which modern culture is based." We will argue, at a later point, that the dualism inherent in Niebuhr can be attributed in large measure to the 'tragic events of modern history' to which Niebuhr refers, rather than to the rational arguments which he uses to support this dualism. But to continue Niebuhr's argument, the events of modern history have challenged every modern presupposition, and shown that "history does not move forward without catastrophe, happiness is not guaranteed by the multiplication of physical comforts, social harmony is not easily created by more intelligence, and human nature is not as good or as harmless as had been supposed. We are thus living in a period in which ... optimism ... has given way to despair, or in which some less sophisticated moderns try desperately to avoid the abyss of despair by holding to credos which all of the facts have disproved." (42)

We have quoted Niebuhr extensively at this point because

he, here, gives perhaps the clearest example of what prompts his own form of dualism. It is prompted partly by the difficulties which he believes are inherent in any ethic based in the natural order, and partly because of his "provisional pessimism", as he calls it. If Huxley's pessimism is "slightly relieved" by a sense of the meaningfulness of life, Niebuhr's is qualified by this and by his faith in a transcendent source of meaning.

What might be termed the 'natural law controversy' in Protestant and Catholic thought occupied a great deal of space in Niebuhr's writing, much of which is beyond the scope of this essay. Paul Ramsey's essay on "Love and Law" in the Living Library Volume is an attempt to expound Niebuhr's thought in this regard. (43) Perhaps the clearest exposition of Niebuhr's own position is given in his essay "Love and Law in Protestantism and Catholicism." (44)

Niebuhr's strictures against the theory of natural law in Roman Catholic moral theology are based on two main difficulties which he discerns in such theory. In his reply to Ramsey's article, Niebuhr summarizes his criticism of natural law and indicates his criteria for doing so in a manner which shows that such a theory cannot do justice to man's unique freedom. He writes:

> " ... I may have been too critical of natural law concepts, but ... the two main points of my criticisms ... (are) ... that these concepts do not allow for the historical character of human existence. They are rooted in a classical rationalism which did not understand history. They therefore do not understand the uniqueness of historical occasion or the biases which creep into the definitions of natural law ... How, for instance, can one declare property to be a right according to natural law when the institution of property represents such various types of power and responsibility in various historical settings? ...
>
> The other point of my criticism of natural law concepts is the tendency to make the law of love an addendum to the natural law, so that one defines the determinate possibilities and the other the indeterminate possibilities of good." (45)

More recently, Niebuhr gave further corroboration to his criticisms of natural law moral theories. The inflexibility to which he refers in his first criticism is cited as the reason why Catholocism has difficulty in dealing with the population

explosion. "I have not revised my criticism that natural-law moral theories, drawn from a metaphysical base, are too inflexible. They cannot, for instance, adjust the prohibition of contraception to the moral necessities of a population explosion in a rapidly spreading technical culture." (46) The tendency to asceticism in Catholicism Niebuhr attributes to its proneness to make the law of love an "addendum" to natural law. "Christian faith has alwys held that love is the final norm of man as free spirit, able to realize himself only in indeterminate self-giving. ... Catholicism derived all proximate norms from the 'natural law', which was drawn from an analysis of the structure of human existence and from a rational calculation of competing rights. Then it consigned the law of love, particularly in its ultimate reaches, to a specific category of 'counsels of perfection'. The result was the division of the Christian community into two grades of Christians, the ordinary Christians and the ascetics and monastics, who were 'able' to realize the 'counsels of perfection'." (47)

In spite of the difficulties he discerns in Catholic natural-law theory, Niebuhr has placed on record in his latest book (48) his "increasing admiration for the Catholic faith". In discussing his "changing perspectives" over the years, he records that this admiration was prompted by "socially pragmatic" factors. "Catholics", he writes, "unlike many Protestants, never had any doubt about the social substance of human existence. The Roman Catholic faith derived much of its 'natural law' tradition from classical sources. Since the natural law was intended to give moral norms for a community, it naturally emphasized justice as the relevant norm... " Niebuhr at no point retracts his criticisms of natural law, yet he appreciates that Catholicism, by means of natural law, has been able to deal creatively with the problems of industrialization.

> "But I have a new appreciation of the fact that a great religious tradition, emancipated from the organic collectivism of the Middle Ages, has been able creatively to help modern technical cultures of the West to solve the moral problems of industrialization. As a result, the Roman Catholic Church never lost the loyalty of its industrial workers. These workers in Protestant cultures often became infected with the virus of the Marxist rebellion." (49)

Anyone familiar with the details of Niebuhr's own 'torturous pilgrimage' cannot fail to miss the autobiographical note in this appreciation of Catholicism. In many ways it expresses the concerns which prompted his own search for adequate criteria for social ethics. It also accounts for his admission that his appreciation is derived from pragmatic considerations. If Catholic emphasis on norms for community is one source of his admiration, its universalism is another. As he says

> " ... in these days in which an entire nation is attempting, in the civil-rights struggle, to come to terms with the 'American Dilemma' (that is, the contradiction between our professed religious, moral, and political ideals and the sorry deprivation of rights for our Negro minority) the Catholic Church has another claim to our admiration. It has been more consistently universalist, and has championed the 'human rights' of all our citizens." (50)

Niebuhr's problems with natural-law theory in Catholicism relate, in the main, to his contention that they do not take adequate account of the unique character of human freedom, and the dramatic character of human history. His intellectual problems are, however, qualified by pragmatic considerations. Judged by their fruits, in Niebuhr's view, Catholics are more to be admired than "many Protestants".

If Catholic natural-law theory has provided more substantial guides to social justice than most Protestants will admit, its basic defect for Niebuhr is its assumption "that history is, like nature, founded in eternal forms or 'essences' which provide the norms." This is a defective view of history, continues Niebuhr, because "all history is a bewildering mixture of human freedom and natural necessity. Therefore the historical dramas and configurations are more varied and more replete with historical contingency than either Aristotle or Thomas Aquinas assumed." (51)

The difficulties inherent in Catholic natural-law are not unlike the difficulties in the new approach to natural morality which Niebuhr discerns in Protestant theology, particularly in its Barthian form. One of Niebuhr's sharpest differences with Barthian theology was that its new emphasis upon natural law made it a servant of reaction and the status quo, whatever its intentions might have been.

In an article on "Barthianism and Political Reaction" Niebuhr argues that both Barth and Brunner began as "frustrated socialists" (52) who became convinced after the events of the First World War that the ideal of a partnership between Christianity and socialism was doomed, and that the establishment of the Kingdom of God on earth was an "idle dream". They returned therefore to an orthodoxy which emphasized the transcendence of God, the perennial sinfulness of the world, and the need for a salvation which transcended the world. At this point the student of Niebuhr will understand Charles West's contention that Niebuhr is a Barthian. (53) There is no doubt that much common ground existed between Niebuhr and Barth. However, as we have seen in this work, there was much that underscores, in Robertson's phrase, "the Barthian that Niebuhr was not." (54)

Niebuhr's differences with Barth, not unexpectedly, lie in the field of ethics. He argues that there are aspects of Barthian theology which can be exploited by political reactionaries. One is Barth's revival of the Lutheran doctrine of the Schoepfungsordnung - the 'orders of creation'. By this, writes Niebuhr "the natural relations of life, family, state, vocation, and race are designated" and ordained by God. (55) The problem, for Niebuhr, in this doctrine is that "there is only one step from the religious sanctification of the order of creation to the religious support of particular types of social organization which the theologian regards as 'god-given.'" (56) There are echoes here of Niebuhr's criticism of Medieval Catholicism's sanctification of the feudal structure of society. The pressing moral problem of Barthian theology was, in Niebuhr's view, that it lent itself to exploitation by those who tried to find religious sanction for events in Germany prior to World War Two: anti-Semitism and the absolutization of the state, being cases in point.

There may be gains in the Barthian position, Niebuhr conceded, especially over against the modern liberal position which imagined that the law of love could be made authoritative in the worlds of politics and economics. "Perhaps there is nothing more important in the ethical reorientation of modern Christianity than a new study of the doctrine of natural law", wrote Niebuhr, because "love perfectionism is clearly no specific guide for the detailed problems which arise in human society." (57) Whatever the gains

of a revival of natural theology may be, in Niebuhr's view, they are hedged about with difficulty. Barth's revival of the 'orders of creation' lends itself to exploitation by political and religious reactionaries who seek religious sanction for the social structures in which they have a vested interest.

Summary

At this point we may summarize our exposition of Niebuhr's theological presuppositions. If a relevant social ethic is to be found which preserves Niebuhr's first theological presupposition that God is the symbol of mystery and meaning, while taking history seriously, a radical distinction between nature and history is necessary. The roots of this distinction, we have argued, are to be found in Niebuhr's understanding of (a) radical monotheism, (b) creation and science, and (c) freedom and natural morality.

Throughout our exposition of Niebuhr's theology to this point we have discerned a tension between explicit statements in which he seeks to give rational warrant to his views, and the discernible pragmatism in which the events of history influence on his thought. He is searching for an adequate way of dealing with the issues of contemporary history in the light of his Hebrew-Christian heritage. Out of the inter-play between that history and that heritage comes a theology, however obscure the method.

Niebuhr has argued that Catholic natural-law and Protestant neo-orthodoxy, exemplified in Barthian theology, are inadequate as they stand in providing the resources for a Christian social ethic. What then is Niebuhr's answer? How can we find a 'law' or a norm for the establishment of tolerable harmony among men? Niebuhr's answer is that love must be translated into justice in the "nicely calculated less and more" of historical reality, and that the pragmatism and relativity inherent in such an answer are unavoidable. In 1959 he indicated the resources necessary for a Christian social ethic, in an article called "The Problem of a Protestant Social Ethic". Under the heading "Toward a Christian Ethic for Our Time" he outlines these resources, which we quote:

> "The Biblical sources of a Christian social ethic are obvious. Among the resources of a Biblical faith are: 1) A sense of divine providence, which

> leads to the recognition that the meaning and mystery of the whole drama of history is greater than all the schemes of meaning in which we try to comprehend it; ... 2) The double emphasis on the 'dignity' of man as a 'child of God' and on his 'misery' as a sinner. In Christian thought the two are always related because it is recognized that they both have the same source in the radical freedom of the human spirit. The sin of man is the corruption of that freedom. The first part of the double emphasis leads to an insistence upon social and political freedom consonant with man's essential freedom. It must be noted, however, that many forms of Christian thought, both Catholic and Protestant, never championed individual freedom, and that John Milton was really the first champion of freedom of conscience on Christian grounds. The second part of the emphasis prevents all utopian schemes, for it recognizes the possibility of evil in even the most ideal social situations. ... 3) The passion for justice as an expression of the love commandment. This is vitally expressed in the Old Testament and particularly in the Prophets. The Old Testament witness is necessary because it deals with collective relations more explicitly than the New Testament. ...
>
> Naturally an adequate Christian social ethic must avail itself of non-Biblical instruments of calculation, chiefly a rational calculation of competing rights and interests and an empirical analysis of the structure of nature, the configurations of history, and the complexities of a given situation in which decisions must be made." (58)

What Niebuhr here refers to as "a sense of divine providence" is what we have called his first major theological presupposition; namely, that God is the symbol of mystery and meaning. What Niebuhr refers to as "the double emphasis" on the dignity and misery of man is what we believe to be his second major theological presupposition; namely, that human history contains encounters between God and man.

(b) Human History Contains Encounters Between God And Man

In what sense can we speak of the 'mighty acts of God' in the world? Niebuhr's answer would be that we can speak of divine providence in relation to the natural world only in the sense in which the mystery and the meaning of the natural world are preserved by the symbol of the Creator God in Biblical mythology.

The natural world is "quasi-autonomous", created by God but not maintained by Him from moment to moment. The natural world is neither divine nor demonic. Nature viewed as a totality is a lawful and quasi-autonomous order. By employing 'quasi-' Niebuhr limits autonomy in that God remains the symbol of mystery and meaning, analagous to Whitehead's 'primordial God', without which we fall into the error of resolving the mystery of creation too easily or believing that it is self-explanatory. By 'autonomous' - Niebuhr emphasizes that divine providence cannot be called in to "explain" natural events. This is the specific task of the scientist. Should the scientist or the philosopher regard his explanations as ultimate, they overstep the limits inherent in the scientific method or in rational explanation. Mystery is not equal to ignorance, in Niebuhr's view. It is an essential characteristic of the natural order which no amount of rational or scientific research can ultimately resolve. The ultimate mystery of the natural order must be preserved if the meaningfulness of existence is to be affirmed. God is the symbol of that mystery and that meaning. Faith, then, is seen by Niebuhr as "the sense of meaning in human existence". A "sense" which the myth of creation most adequately expresses, when, in story form, it tells this truth about this mystery and this meaning. In his article "The Truth in Myths", he writes:

> "The myth of creation, in which God is neither identified with the historical world nor separated from it, offers the basis upon which all theologies are built in which God is conceived as both the ground and the ultimate fulfillment of a meaningful world, as both creator and judge of historical existence. This paradox is really the only ground of an effective ethic because it alone harmonizes ethical and metaphysical interests, and gives us a picture of a world which is really a universe, but not so unqualifiedly a meaningful world as to obscure the fact of evil and the possibility of a dynamic ethics." (59)

For Niebuhr, the realm of human history is the realm in which we can speak of the 'mighty acts of God', because human history contains "encounters" between God and man. If God does not intervene in the natural order, because of its "quasi-autonomous" character, he does intervene in human history. This is not to say that God can be called in to explain events in human history. If science has made the notion of God's

intervention in the natural order obscurantist, it has also refuted orthodox conceptions of "special providence". God is not to be conceived as one cause in the link of causation, nor even as the 'First Cause'. Neither is He to be conceived as an "arbitary monarch whose caprice accounts for specific events in the whole variegated drama of history." (60)

His clearest expression of his view that human history must be seen as containing encounters between God and man is found in his article "Coherence, Incoherence, and the Christian Faith". Human history, he writes, "must be understood as containing within it the encounters between man and God". These encounters are those "in which God intervenes to reconstruct the rational concepts of meaning which men and cultures construct under the false assumption that they have a mind which completely transcends the flux of history, when actually it can only construct a realm of meaning from a particular standpoint within the flux." (61) Here we have a similar argument to the one which Niebuhr uses in his attempt to validate his first presupposition. God is encountered, so the argument went, at those places where men reach the limits of reason because mystery cannot be resolved by reason. Though reason must be used, a penumbra of mystery remained when reason had done its job. The argument for God's intervention in human history is of a similar type. God is encountered at those places where men have over-reached themselves and sought to find a centre of meaning from within the flux of history itself. History, according to Niebuhr, cannot be its own saviour any more than reason can. Edward Carnell calls this form of argument Niebuhr's "negative pre-soteric proof" of the validity of the Faith. In his article on "Niebuhr's Criteria of Verification", Carnell writes:

> "Negative pre-soteric proof turns on this: that every effort to define the end of history from some perspective within history ends in a threat to both life and history." (62)

That "history contains encounters between God and man" is a presupposition and as such cannot in any ultimate sense be rationally validated. However, Niebuhr believes that when in commerce with all forms of human knowledge a self-justification lies in the power of his presuppositions to illuminate meaning, yet to stand as a bastion against false centres of meaning which emerge

within the flux of history. Much of Niebuhr's work may, in fact, be understood as an attempt to prove his thesis that "a human righteousness, which is not subjected to a purer righteousness than anything to be found in nature or in history, must inevitably degenerate into a fanatic self-righteousness." (63) Carnell sums up Niebuhr's argument in this regard:

> "In the stead of God who judges and forgives sinners from a perspective beyond history, some absolutized aspect of either form or vitality serves as a rallying point for the faithful on the one side, and a guide in eliminating nonconformists on the other. This results in either a premature flight from history or a Procrusteanizing of creativity to fit some individual or tribal virtue." (64)

The Nature of the Encounter

How is God encountered in human history, we may ask? Niebuhr's answer gives us a clue both to his understanding of God and of how He acts in history. When Niebuhr gives a name to the transcendent symbol of mystery and meaning, he speaks of God as Creator, as Judge, and as Redeemer. And it is as these that He is encountered.

(a) As Creator. God is encountered in "creativities which introduce elements into the historic situation which could not have been anticipated." (65) God's covenant with Israel is a Biblical example of His creativity. A modern example may be America's assumption of responsibility as a 'super-power'. In his essay "History (God) Has Overtaken Us", to which we referred in Chapter Four, Niebuhr argued that historical events, such as America's participation in the Second World War, have a providential quality about them. Neither America's participation in the War nor her subsequent role in world affairs were anticipated. Niebuhr has in fact defined providence in a way which suggests that this chapter of modern history is an example of God's "creativities". In a letter to a student Niebuhr defines what he understands by Providence:

> "I would say anything is Providential which is not by human contrivance. Butterfield speaks of 'secular providence'. This is, those events

> in history which are beyond human contrivance and which people must believe in even if they do not believe that all the effects are under a Divine rule. They are patterns of history above and beyond what people intend ... " (May, 1955) (66)

(b) As Judge: God is also encountered in "judgement whenever human ideals, values, and historical achievements are discovered to be in contradiction to the divine rather than in simple harmony with the ultimate coherence of things." (67) The role of the prophets in pointing to such contradiction is a Biblical example of what Niebuhr means by judgement. What we have called his 'handles to history' - tragedy and irony, for example - may in fact be described as prophetic tools shaped to point to such contradiction in modern history. Our discussion in the last chapter of the irony of the 'Cold War' is a case in point.

(c) As Redeemer: Finally, according to Niebuhr, God is encountered in events "in which the divine judgements may lead to a reconstitution of life. These are revelations of redeeming grace in which the old self, including the collective self of false cultures, is destroyed, but the destruction leads to newness of life." (68) The Christ-event as the final point of the Heilgeschichte is the ultimate example of what Niebuhr means by "reconstitution". Bingham draws attention to a modern example of reconstitution in political life. She writes:

> "One of the old structures that has been renewed rather than destroyed by history has been Western capitalism. As Niebuhr said in James Chapel, 1959,
>
> > 'We all have mixed economies today. History's inadvertance - or Providence - dissolved the conflicting dogmas of the right and the left into a creative synthesis'." (69)

If human history can be seen as containing encounters of the sort we have examined above, then it is as a corollary to the unique character of human freedom. The "encounters", as we have seen, lie in the drama in which divine providence

confronts human effort. They are not to be understood, therefore, apart from human freedom.

(1) THE RADICAL FREEDOM OF MAN

The roots of Niebuhr's thought can be traced from Augustine, the Reformers, Pascal, Kierkegaard, through to Barth. He has acknowledged that the 'existentialism' of Kierkegaard and Barth had a formative influence on his thought. He differs, however, in important respects from both Kierkegaard and Barth. He wants to take history more seriously than he believed Kierkegaard did, and he wants to take philosophy and the sciences more seriously than he believed Barth did. These important differences granted, Niebuhr's Christian Realism is broadly existentialist as it is neo-orthodox. (70)

His understanding of man's radical freedom is testimony to his form of existentialism. He argues that the ultimate mystery of freedom is expressed mythically in the creation. As such it does not impinge directly on our experience but is something we know only in our moments of deepest reflection. It becomes directly relevant to us "only as it represents an ultimate mystery of freedom, which is related to the mystery of our freedom." (71) In his Gifford Lectures Niebuhr describes the two aspects of the mystery of man's freedom in this way:

> "Both the majesty and the tragedy of human life exceed the dimension within which modern culture seeks to comprehend human existence. The human spirit cannot be held within the bounds of either natural necessity or rational prudence. In its yearning toward the infinite lies the source of both human creativity and human sin ...
>
> The fact that man can transcend himself in infinite regression and cannot find the end of life except in God is the mark of his creativity and uniqueness; closely related to this capacity is his inclination to transmute his partial and finite self and his partial and finite values into the infinite good. Therein lies his sin." (72)

In other words, man is unique in his "responsible freedom"; this is one aspect of the mystery of his freedom. And man is unique in the "corruption of that freedom"; this is the other

aspect of the mystery of man's freedom.[73] The mystery of man's freedom becomes apparent not only when we reflect on the meaning of existence as such. It can be known introspectively, and is directly experienced by us. It remains an unresolved mystery because it cannot be fitted into a rational or natural system of coherence.

(i) The Mystery Of Man's "Responsible Freedom".

What Niebuhr means by man's capacity to transcend himself "in infinite regression" becomes clearer when he expounds the nature of man's freedom. Our "responsible freedom" can be established introspectively. Niebuhr's argument is that we know that although there are previous causes to explain our actions, we know also that we stand above the flow of causes and are ourselves the cause of our actions. In his article "Freedom" Niebuhr lists some of its facets.[74] Man's conceptual capacity is one: Man is "able to apprehend not only single events and objects but to comprehend the flux of events in its general patterns and essential character." Another facet of man's freedom is his capacity to retain events in his memory and is able "by remembering history, to affect history." Man is a creature of nature and necessity, and insofar as this is true his actions "are determined by previous events" and "subject to scientific analysis." But insofar as man is free, events in history cannot be predicted with the same accuracy as is possible in the natural sciences. The difference between the historical and natural sciences may be attributed to the unique character of man's freedom.

> "The historical sciences are in a different category from the natural sciences. ... The good historian is therefore half artist and half scientist. He is a scientist in that he may analyse causes and historical trends. He is an artist in that he must interpret the meaning of an historical structure according to a general system of meaning, which his imagination partly imposes upon them and partly elicits from them.
>
> Since the ultimate freedom of the person beyond all psychological, economic, political, geographic and other determining factors is always hidden and can be known only introspectively. ... there is a natural temptation

> for all students of historical events to be more deterministic than the facts warrant. The freedom of persons ... remains a threat to every scientific account of historical events." (75)

Among the important conclusions which Niebuhr draws from his understanding of man's freedom is that the social and political freedoms "which modern democratic communities accord persons express the belated convictions of modern communities, gained after desperate struggles, that the community must give the persons a social freedom which corresponds to the essential freedom of his nature." (76)

For Niebuhr, the "unique and radical freedom of man" and its consequence for our understanding of history, "gives validity to the biblical account of history." He continues,

> "The Biblical account assumes a divine providence over individual and collective destinies, which establishes meaning on the vast panorama of history, without annulling human freedom ... alternative methods of establishing meaning by co-ordinating historical events into systems of natural or rational coherences, tend to create excessively deterministic or equally excessive voluntaristic interpretations ... in which either the freedom or the finiteness of men is obscured." (77)

Niebuhr's argument here is characteristic of his thought generally. He argues that if we look at ourselves we discern a mystery of freedom which neither natural causality nor rational coherence can fully explain. If man is free in this sense, history cannot be subjected to rational analysis because such analysis cannot do justice to the freedom which we know introspectively. This view of freedom and this view of history gives credance to the biblical view. For the biblical view assumes a divine providence over individual and collective (historical) destiny without annulling man's freedom. The biblical view is, therefore, adequate because it is not deterministic as rational and natural attempts to establish meaning in history tend to be. It allows man's unique freedom. The biblical view is adequate, in addition, because it is not voluntaristic. It understands man to be finite. This is symbolized by its assumption of divine providence. Man is therefore free but finite. This, it would seem to us, is tantamount to saying we are men and not God. And this,

it seems, is what Niebuhr is saying by his exposition of freedom. Man is free, and man is man. Man's freedom and his 'finiteness' are inherent in his nature. But this, as we shall later argue, is to say that man derives his freedom from his essential nature as man, and tends to separate man from God. It is only in an ultimate sense that man's freedom or his essential nature derives from God, it would seem. The ultimate sense is the sense which the mystery of creation preserves. If nature is 'quasi-autonomous' in that it is created by God, but not maintained by Him from moment to moment, so it would seem is man 'quasi-autonomous'. Man is created by God, and in this sense derives his essential nature (and therefore his freedom) from God. But man is free, in the same way that nature is free. This, it would seem to us, is to obscure aspects of the Biblical view of man and history.

Because of his understanding of man's freedom, Niebuhr is critical of rational and natural attempts to encompass it. He is critical also of theological attempts to do this. If rational and natural attempts to make sense of the mystery of man's freedom tend to obscure that mystery, any attempts to substitute God for either nature or reason tend to do the same.

> " ... it must be admitted that versions of the Christian faith frequently interpret the idea of providence so that the freedom of man is annulled or imperiled and God appears to be an arbitary despot of the historical drama who creates meanings by special providence, that is, by interference with the natural causalities and coherences which always furnish the foundation upon which human freedom erects the various pinnacles of history. Calvinism has been particularly guilty of the primitive interpretation of the legitimate biblical idea of the sovereignty of a mysterious divine power who is both the creator and providential preserver of the human and historical enterprise." (78)

It seems that here we have another instance of the enigmatic character of Niebuhr's thought. On the one hand, he defines providence in a manner which tends to make it remote and ultimate in order to preserve man's freedom. On the other hand, his attempts to interpret God's action in history appear to operate out of a different understanding of providence. An example is his article "History (God) Has Overtaken Us" which, it will be

remembered, identifies God with the dramatic events which led to America's participation in the Second World War. Because he believes history to be revelatory of God, he can speak of America's participation in the War in providential terms. The point that Niebuhr is making in his criticism of theological views which tend to make God the champion of particular events in history - thus giving them religious sanction - must in some measure be granted. The dangers of such a view Niebuhr has strenuously voiced throughout his life. This does not mean, however, that God does not act in history. On the one hand, Niebuhr is affirming that God 'precipitates' particular events in history, and, on the other hand, he refuses to allow religious sanction to be given to particular events in history.

Niebuhr has spoken of the mystery of man's responsible freedom. If we ask, in what sense responsible, Niebuhr's answer would be that man is accountable for his actions, both good and bad. This leads us to the other aspect of man's freedom which is prominent in Niebuhr's thought.

(ii) The Mystery Of The "Corruption" Of Man's Freedom.

If responsible freedom is one mysterious aspect of man's freedom, then "the greater mystery" is the "corruption of that freedom and the resulting sin and guilt." (79) If the mystery of man's freedom cannot be encompassed by rational means, and is validated in experience, so too is "the mystery of the inevitability of man's misuse of his freedom for his own ends. The persistence on universality of man's undue self-regard is so well established that every valid political science must take it for granted. ... his 'misery' and his 'dignity' have the same root, namely, his freedom." (80)

Niebuhr relates the mystery of corruption of freedom to man's finiteness. Man does not sin because he is finite (for this would mean that the Creator God is responsible for sin), neither does he sin because he is ignorant (for this would mean that sin could eventually be eradicated by more education - the liberal illusion). Man sins precisely because he wants to be God and not man; his sin arises out of his efforts to obscure his finiteness.

> "The mystery of man's sin is strangely related to his finiteness in the sense that it is not derived from finiteness or ignorance but is rather the consequence of man's futile effort to escape or to obscure the fact of his finiteness. ... If one appreciates the symbolic nature of the observation, one can agree with Augustine's statement that 'Men fall into sin, which they could avoid, in trying to avoid death which they cannot avoid.' The mystery of the evil in man does not easily yield to rational explanations because evil is the corruption of a good, namely, man's freedom." (81)

If the corruption of freedom can be established introspectively, so can responsibility for that corruption. Under the heading: "Responsibility Despite Inevitability" in his Gifford Lectures, Niebuhr puts the matter this way. "The fact of responsibility is attested by the feeling of remorse or repentance which follows the sinful action. ... (The self's) contemplation of its act involves both the discovery and the reassertion of its freedom. It discovers that some degree of conscious dishonesty accompanied the act, which means that the self was not deterministically and blindly involved in it. Its discovery of that fact in contemplation is a further degree of the assertion of freedom than is possible in the moment of the action." (82)

Niebuhr finds justification in the myth of the Fall for his understanding of evil as the corruption of good. If faith in a transcendent God made it possible for Hebraic religion to avoid the identification of God with the nation (totemism), it also made it possible to avoid the identification of God with the imperfections of historical existence (pantheism). This faith, Niebuhr continues

> " ... made it possible to affirm confidence in a meaningful existence even though the world was full of sorrow and evil. Some of the sorrow and misery was attributed to human sin. It was because man sinned that thorns and thistles grew in his field and he was forced to earn his bread by the sweat of his brow. The myth of the fall may solve the problem of evil too easily by attributing all inadequacies of nature to the imperfections of man, but it contains one element of truth found in all profound religions, and that is that it reduces man's pride and presumption in judging the justice of the universe by making him conscious of his own sin and imperfection and suggesting that at least some of the evil from which he suffers is a price of the freedom

which makes it possible for him to sin." (83)

Pride, or man's misuse of his freedom for his own ends, is rebellion against God. As such it is the basic form of sin, and it issues in injustice toward others and in injury to the self in sensuality. It is that rebellion against God which the devil in religious mythology symbolizes. " ... there is always a devil in classical religious mythology, and the devil is a symbol of the belief that evil is regarded as an actual rebellion against God. Of course, this realism is always balanced by an ultimate optimism, because it is never believed that the devil can seriously threaten the rule of God." (84) Pride issues in injustice toward others. Niebuhr's defence of democracy is precisely that it is the form of government which controls man's capacity for injustice while according man the freedom which is his essential nature. "Man's capacity for justice makes democracy possible, but man's inclination to injustice makes democracy necessary." (85) Pride involves injury to self in sensuality. William Wolf summarizes Niebuhr's thought on sensuality: "the self in its freedom gives undue devotion to some element of vitality within the self." (86)

Two points should be noted here; both of which will be amplified later in this chapter. First, Niebuhr resolves the problem of theodicy by ascribing responsibility for evil to man's sinful nature. That is to say, man's freedom is what gives him his capacity for good and bad, and he is responsible for both. His distinction between historical evil and natural evil is evidence of how theodicy is resolved by reference to man. Bingham summarizes Niebuhr's thought in this way,

> "When Niebuhr calls anger the proper attitude toward evil, he is referring more to historical evil than natural evil. Historical evil is defined as the 'bloodshed, slavery and social misery ... of the world' brought about by the sinful misuse of human freedom. Natural evil, on the other hand, is typified by a child's death from disease." (87)

It is instructive to note Niebuhr's view of natural evil because it indicates his interpretation of the biblical view of evil. He writes, in Faith And History,

> "The obscurities and incoherences of life are, according to Biblical faith, primarily the

> consequence of human actions. The incoherences and confusions, usually defined as 'natural' evil, are not the chief concern of the Christian faith. Natural evil represents the failure of nature's processes to conform perfectly to human ends. It is the consequence of man's ambiguous position in nature. As a creature of nature he is subject to accidents and contingencies which may be completely irrelevant to the wider purposes, interests, and ambitions which he conceives and elaborates as creative spirit. The most vivid symbol of natural evil is death. Death is a simple fact in the dimension of nature; but it is an irrelevance and a threat of meaninglessness in the realm of history. Biblical faith is, however, only obliquely interested in the problem of natural evil. It does not regard death, as such, as an evil. 'The sting of death', declares St. Paul, 'is sin'." (88)

It is not our purpose here to discuss the truth or otherwise of the content of Niebuhr's statement about 'natural evil'. The significant point to note is that Niebuhr resolves the problem of evil in history by ascribing it to man's sin, and the problem of natural evil by ascribing it to nature's "failure" to conform to human needs and goals. Natural evil, in Niebuhr's view, is therefore only of "oblique" interest to the Christian faith. This is because, for Niebuhr, the Christian faith, and indeed the biblical faith, is primarily concerned with the problem of evil in human history. The reference to death in his statement is reminiscent of his argument about death being related to man's finiteness, as we saw earlier. In his treatment of theodicy Niebuhr, it seems, stands in the Augustinian tradition. Evil is ascribed to man's sin and is seen as rebellion against God. His treatment of natural evil is superficial (he devotes one paragraph of his Faith And History to the problem) and as such he does not reflect the Augustinian tradition well.

According to John Hick, Augustine's controversy with Manichaeism and his adaptation of Plotinian theodicy leads him to affirm the natural order. He does this by rejecting "the ancient Platonic, Neo-Platonic, Gnostic, and Manichaean prejudice against matter and lays the foundation for a Christian naturalism that rejoices in this world, and instead of fleeing from it as a snare to the soul, seeks to use it and share it in gratitude to God for His bountiful goodness." (89) While Niebuhr

does affirm the goodness of the created order, he does not work toward a 'Christian naturalism': in fact as we have seen, he proposes a radical distinction between nature and history. His superficial treatment of natural evil can be seen as yet another unfortunate consequence of this distinction which is inherent in his theology. This in turn arises from the radical distinction between God and His creation in Augustine. Niebuhr's Augustinian emphasis on the radical distinction between God and His creation is contained in his handling of the Christian doctrine of creatio ex nihilo.

Evil, according to Augustine is "privation of good". There "can be no evil where there is no good" because "nothing evil exists in itself, but only as an evil aspect of some actual entity. ... Evils, therefore, have their source in the good, and unless they are parasitic on something good, they are not anything at all." (90) As we have seen, for Niebuhr evil in human history is attributable to man's sin, and man's sin is a corruption of his essential freedom, which is good.

We must now comment on one other aspect of Niebuhr's thought before concluding this discussion of the mystery of the corruption of man's freedom.

For Niebuhr, pride is the quintessence of sin. As such it alienates men from God, is the source of injustice in society, and does injury to the self. A large part of the first volume of his Gifford Lectures is devoted not only to an analysis of this understanding of pride, but also to an analysis of the three forms of pride which he distinguishes. They are pride of power, pride of knowledge, and pride of virtue.(91) The question we raise is whether this identification of pride with sin does not derive from his pessimism about man's nature.

Niebuhr has surely experienced a form of pride which was good and healthy. How would the workers in Detroit have fared in their struggle for a more equal distribution of power if they had not taken a legitimate 'pride' in their identity as workers? Can you love your neighbour without a legitimate form of self-love, or pride in yourself? Is 'worker-consciousness', which it seems is a social and psychological pre-requisite if labour is to organize itself, possible without a legitimate

form of pride. Is pride the quintessence of sin? Is there not a legitimate pride of power, of knowledge, and of virtue? Must sensuality be attributed to sin?

It seems that Niebuhr's pessimism about man's nature and his achievements enables him to devote far more space in his Gifford Lectures to an analysis of the abuse of power, knowledge, virtue, and sensuality than he does to the right use of these aspects of man's nature and his achievements. Is there not some substance in the suggestions of present day writers that it is not superbia (pride) but acedia (sloth or apathy) that is the debilitating sin of our times? These writers, from widely differing viewpoints, seem to agree that of the seven deadly sins acedia - which for Catholic theologian Joseph Pieper means that man "renounces the claim implicit in his human dignity" - is the root cause of man's incapacity to care. For it means taking a view of oneself and of others which does not do justice to what is implied in the theological notion of imago dei and the responsibility which that entails, the gubernatio mundi - the exercise of the care of the world. (92) Is the care of the world possible where there is not a healthy self-regard, a healthy pride in achievement, a greater affirmation of the truth encompassed by the notion of imago dei?

It must be granted that emphasis upon pride has given Niebuhr a lever with which to prise open the unquestioned abuse of power and privelege which lead to injustice and to injury to self in contemporary society. We do not question Niebuhr's understanding of sin as man's capacity to make of himself and of his collectivities idolatrous centres of meaning. We do question whether his emphasis on sin as pride helps man to shoulder his responsibility for the care of the world?

(2) THE MYSTERY OF GOD AND MAN ILLUMINED BY THE CHRIST-EVENT.

We have already examined Niebuhr's understanding of the Christ-event in some detail in Chapter Four. But it is important here to see how Niebuhr interprets the Christ-event as illuminating the mystery of God and the mystery of man.

"All religions," writes Niebuhr, "try to assert some

meaning in the realm of mystery or they stand in awe before mystery and let it discount all particular finite and limited meanings by which men seek to make sense out of their life." (93) He believes that the classical mystical faiths tend to solve the mystery of man's freedom and the mystery of man's sin by affirming the divine mystery. Biblical faith, on the other hand, engages "in the hazardous enterprise of discerning in some events in history a revelatory depth or height, 'a light that shineth in darkness', which are clues to the meaning of history. Christianity goes further and asserts ... that all previous revelatory moments are summarized and climaxed in the drama of the suffering Messiah, in the 'Christ-event.'" (94)

For Niebuhr, Christianity stands or falls by what it affirms about the Christ-event. What it affirms about that event cannot be expressed in ontological terms because such terms lead to apparent illogicality, as is evidenced by early attempts at dogmatic formulation of the 'the two natures of Christ', for example. But this is not to say that affirmations about the Christ-event are not meaningful. They are meaningful for the light they throw upon the human situation and the divine mystery.

> " ... the Christian faith makes sense in affirming that an historic person and event, in the context of the history of Messianic expectations, were a revelation of the divine mercy and justice, and that the crucifixion was the final revelation and symbol of the universality of human sin and the incapacity of men to solve the moral problem of human existence by the strenuousness of their moral striving." (95)

The revelatory Christ-event, then, makes sense when men recognize the "fragmentariness of all human virtue". If men recognize this, Christ can become for them the symbol of ultimate mercy and the hiatus between human and divine righteousness can be overcome.

The Christian faith makes some ultimate claims for Christ, and upon these claims it rests. For Niebuhr, these may be summed up in this way: "It asserts that we have, in the Christ revelation, the sum and climax of all previous clues to the mystery of both human existence and the relation of the divine creativity to the purposes of history." (96) This does not mean that the Christ revelation is the only revelation, but that it is the

most definitive for the Christian.

The Christ-event is interpreted by Niebuhr as offering a basic "clue" to our understanding of God, and to the meaning of our existence. In his essay, "Mystery and Meaning" (1958), he explains:

> "It gives a clue by faith to the mystery of creation for it substitutes for the unknown X of the primordial god, the conception of a divine source and end of all historical meanings and purposes." (97)

It gives this clue "by faith": to say that man's historical existence is meaningful is, for Niebuhr, to make a statement of faith about that existence. It is a faith statement because rational or natural systems of coherence are limited in that they cannot, in themselves, lead one ultimately to an affirmation of the meaningfulness of existence. If we assert that existence is meaningful, we do so by faith and not by reason. It is important to note that Niebuhr means by existence 'historical existence', and that any statement about its meaningfulness, whether Christian or not, is based on a presupposition of faith. In his Gifford Lectures, he speaks of the impossibility of an interpretation of history which is not based on some such presupposition of faith:

> "It is, in fact, impossible to interpret history at all without a principle of interpretation which history as such does not yield. The various principles of interpretation current in modern culture, such as the idea of progress or the Marxist concept of an historical dialectic, are all principles of interpretation introduced by faith. They claim to be conclusions about the nature of history at which men arrive after a 'scientific' analysis of the course of events; but there can be no such analysis of the course of events which does not make use of some presupposition of faith, as the principle of analysis and interpretation." (98)

For Niebuhr, then, an affirmation about the meaningfulness of history is impossible without a presupposition of faith. For the Christian, that presupposition (or "clue") is the Christ-event. The test of the validity of the Christ-event is that it makes sense of the realities we experience. One reality we experience is the mystery of our existence as such, another mystery which we experience is the mystery of our freedom and its sinful corruption. Without a "clue" to these mysteries

which we experience it is not possible to make sense of them. This is because nothing in reason or in nature can lead us to an understanding of their meaning. An analysis of the structures of the natural order, and of the laws of logic can lead us to certain conclusions about the structure of that order and about the nature of the mind. But it does not follow from these conclusions that existence is meaningful. Such a conclusion, for Niebuhr, is an affirmation of faith. The clue to that meaning is given in the Christ-event. Our experience as creatures of history is real and not epiphenomenal, and our experience of freedom and its sinful corruption is real and not illusory. These experienced realities have a "status in the total realm of reality". For the Christian, the Christ-event is the basic clue to the meaning of that totality.

Niebuhr's argument is that if interpretations of history are based on presuppositions of faith, these presuppositions must in turn be tested by their adequacy in making sense of the "experienced realities". As such his argument is reminiscent of Pascal. He, in fact, acknowledged his indebtedness to Pascal in this context when he wrote to a young man considering becoming a minister:

> " ... it became clear to me that by the nature of the human and the divine self there cannot be a 'rational' validation of religious experience. Religious faith must remain to the end, on the one hand, in Pascal's phrase, 'a great gamble' while it is on the other hand a certainty based on an accumulation of experience'. Pascal, living in a rationalistic century dominated by Descartes, was incidentally my best guide as he has been the guide for many in our generation." (99)

In what sense then is history given meaning by the Christ-event? Niebuhr's answer is that because of man's unique and radical freedom, historical experience requires meaning. History requires meaning by virtue of man's capacity to rise indeterminately above all rational or natural systems of coherence. The Christ-event gives meaning to history by its capacity to illumine the mystery of human freedom in its sinful corruption. "It answers the human predicament of sin, of the inevitable inclination of man to use his freedom for his own ends, and of the infection of this self-regard in even the highest reaches of

moral endeavour." (100) The answer to the human predicament, Niebuhr argues in his Gifford Lectures, is the assertion of the Christian faith that the God whom we experience as Judge is also the God of Mercy, and that the gap between divine and human goodness has been overcome by His initiative.

> "All the difficult Christian theological dogmas of atonement and justification are efforts to explicate the ultimate mystery of divine wrath and mercy in its relation to man. The good news of the gospel is that God takes the sinfulness of man into Himself, and overcomes in His own heart what cannot be overcome in human life, since human life remains within the vicious circle of sinful self-glorification on every level of moral advance.
>
> This is rightly regarded as the final revelation of the personality of God. It is final because it is the revelation of God's freedom in the highest reaches of its transcendence. ...
>
> Christian faith regards the revelation in Christ as final because this ultimate problem (of how God's mercy triumphs over His wrath) is solved by the assurance that God takes man's sin upon Himself and into Himself, and that without this divine initiative and this divine sacrifice there could be no reconciliation and no easing of man's uneasy conscience. This revelation is final not only as a category of interpreting the total meaning of history but also as a solution for the problem of the uneasy conscience of each individual. ..." (101)

The Deus Absconditus is thus also the Deus Revelatus. But the manner in which God revealed Himself was not the manner which man expected. The Christ of the New Testament, according to Niebuhr, stood under a Messianic "aura", and was therefore expected to clarify the ambiguities of man and history by the "clear victory of the righteous over the unrighteous as the culmination of the meaning of history. He (however) clarified history in another way than was intended. Everything that is best in history is discovered under this light to be involved in the tragedy of innocent suffering." (102) Evidence of this fact, for Niebuhr, is that the highest achievements of human culture - Hebraic religion and Roman law - were involved in the tragedy of that suffering.

In what sense does the idea of a suffering and therefore merciful God offer a clue to the meaning of human existence?

Niebuhr's answer is that reflection on the mystery of human freedom and its sinful corruption - common to the experience of all men - may persuade us of the adequacy of this clue in clarifying the mystery of man's self-regard.

> "It clears up two problems about man's self-regard. It does not regard this phenomenon as normative even though it be universal. That is to say, it insists on taking sin seriously and repudiates all theories which regard egotism as harmless because it is natural; or which regard it as harmful but do not see that the universal characteristic of human behaviour is not a normative experience of the human self. The other problem which is clarified is the problem of what to do about this persistent and universal human egotism. That is answered on an ultimate level by divine forgiveness. It must be answered on all proximate levels of statecraft by providing all kinds of guards against the dangers of both collective and individual egotism." (103)

The clue offered by the idea of divine suffering love not only clarifies the mystery of man's persistent self-regard, it also clarifies the antecedent problem of man's freedom. It does so by suggesting that the perfect self-giving love of the cross is the norm for human conduct. If man is free, what norm is he to use in his conduct of his life and of his relations with other men? The cross, which symbolizes the divine suffering love, suggests that that norm as agape. There are, however, two problems inherent in making agape the norm of human conduct, says Niebuhr.

> "One is that insofar as the love of the neighbour is the obvious norm of human freedom and can be validated by any rigorous analysis of the human situation, it does not seem to require the acceptance by faith of a particular revelation. ... Why should we engage in hazardous acts of faith when the daylight of common experience can enlighten our darkness?
>
> The second difficulty is that sacrificial love, as exemplified by the love of Christ, the agape of the New Testament, is too pure to be a guide for the ordering of the affairs of the community. These require the norms of justice and the mutualities of philia rather than the pure transcendence over self of the New Testament agape. It is, in short, very difficult, if not impossible, to construct an adequate social ethic, requiring a careful calculation of competing rights, from an agape ethic." (104)

Why, then, preserve the ideal of agape as the norm of human conduct? Niebuhr's reply is that it should be preserved, not because it is a simple possibility (the liberal Christian illusion) or as a 'counsel of perfection' (as in the Roman Catholic view). It should be preserved as "a symbol of the indeterminate possibilities of love in which human freedom stands; and as the transcendent or 'eschatological' pinnacle of the ethical life of man." (105) Here Niebuhr's argument is that any attempts to construct an ethical system without the symbol of suffering-love is bound to cut off this pinnacle "by some standard of prudence or some estimate of human conduct", (106) and thereby to deny man's self-transcendent nature. Niebuhr seems here to be arguing that just as it is not possible to find a source of meaning in history from within history itself, so it is impossible to construct an adequate ethical system on the basis of man's capacity for ethical motivation and ethical action. History, according to Niebuhr, acquires meaning from a vantage point beyond history, and the construction of an ethical norm requires a transcendent norm if it is to do justice to man's capacity for self-transcendence. The universal reverence for "the heroic act and for the martyr's sacrifice ... attest to the universal acceptance of the validity of the trans-historical tangents of the meaning of our existence." (107) What Niebuhr is saying is that the self-sacrifice exhibited in heroism and martyrdom and man's reverence of these attest his capacity to transcend himself. Agape, which is central to Christian faith, is thus part of our experience. As such it does not validate the Christian affirmations about God as suffering love. It does, however, strike a chord with something which is part of man's experience. In this sense the adequacy though not the truth, of the Christian affirmation is attested.

In the final analysis:

> "The only way of validating such a faith is to bear witness to it in life. ... R.B. Braithwaite, ... has come to the conclusion that the only way of validating the Christian faith is by the witness of 'living in an agapeistic way'. ... Professor Braithwaite is wrong only in one aspect of this affirmation. He has reduced the Christian faith to the simple moral proposition that 'God is love' and that we ought to love one another. The Christian faith is more profound than this kind of moral idealism. It declares that God is love and that his love is the final source of

> harmony for men who know they ought to love one another but who really love themselves. The faith is an answer to their moral predicament and becomes meaningless if the predicament is not known." (108)

In his essay "Christians and Jews in Western Civilization", Niebuhr elaborates his understanding of "witness" in this way:

> " ... the two faiths share not only a common monotheism but a common attitude toward history, toward historic responsibilities and toward our relation to the creator God as a sovereign of history.
>
> ... both faiths derive not only their ethical creativity and their life-affirming impulse from the acceptance in faith of an historical revelation. ... How is the claim to be validated, in the one case that Israel is the chosen people of God, and in the other case that 'God was in Christ reconciling the world unto himself?' ... Both covenants assume that an historic fact is more than mere fact; it is but a disclosure of the mystery which bares history. In both cases a community of believers is organized on the basis of faith's apprehension of the revelatory depth of the fact. In both cases the burden of proof is on the covenant community that this exclusively apprehended revelation does not imply an exclusive God; ... In both cases the only proof of the affirmation of faith must be 'witness', the witness of life, which is oriented not to some private and peculiar God, but to the divine sovereign who is equally rigorous in his demands upon believers and upon unbelievers and offers no special subject to this God and responds to him in faithfulness and repentance, in gratitude and hope, can only be proved by the quality of a life. Both faiths must bear witness to their revelation. Both faiths are in danger of neglecting the scientific and metaphysical tests for universal validity, which, incidentally, may eliminate caprice but are always in danger of annulling both the mystery of man, who transcends the coherences of nature and reason; and the mystery of history, which is the realm of both divine and human freedom." (109)

(3) THE PROMISE OF NIEBUHR'S THEOLOGICAL METHOD

Our paradigm of Niebuhr's theology indicates his theological presuppositions. In the nature of the case, this paradigmatic treatment of Niebuhr's thought cannot do full justice to its rich

and variegated texture. This is due partly to the built-in limitations of such a treatment, but also to his dialectical style. It serves, however, to show the theological groundwork of his ethics and apologetics, and to indicate that it was within the framework of these theological presuppositions that he pursued his work as a social ethicist and Christian apologist.

The enigmatic quality of his writing lies in the fact that his formal statements of theological position, few as they are, raise as many questions as they seek to solve. In the final section of this chapter we will make some proposals concerning the problems raised by his theology. Niebuhr, of course, was not a systematic theological _per se_. He was a teacher of Christian social ethics. As such, his main interest lay in establishing the foundations for social choice. To be sure, this involved him in theological reflection. But the main purpose of his reflection remained the solution of the moral problem.

By his own admission, Niebuhr's love - apart from social ethics - was the apologetic task. Throughout his life he engaged in a running battle with what Schleiermacher described as Christianity's 'intellectual despisers'. Niebuhr's style is therefore polemical. He cannot be understood apart from the intellectual issues which were his _Sitz im Leben_. If Barth may have dismissed the apologetic task by stating that the Gospel "cannot be recommended and defended; it has no advocates and no propogandists", (110) Niebuhr held the contrary view. "My avocational interest as a kind of circuit rider in the colleges and universities has prompted an interest in the defence and justification of the Christian faith in a secular age..." (111)

It is as an ethicist and an apologist that Niebuhr exerts a far-reaching and important influence both in the United States and in Europe. Ronald Stone is on record as saying that contemporary debates in Protestant social ethics are dominated by former students of H. Richard or Reinhold Niebuhr. According to Stone students of American social thought cannot bypass Reinhold Niebuhr:

> "His critique of the Social Gospel, theological liberalism, pragmatism, Lutheranism, and American political structures and values, while incorporating aspects of all of them, make his work a watershed for social ethics in this country.

The problems of social ethics have been redefined by Reinhold Niebuhr, ..." (112)

(a) Christian Social Ethics

Part of the redefinition of social ethics to which Stone refers lies in Niebuhr's justification of the phrase 'social ethics' itself. He argued that an ethic derived from the New Testament is founded on the whole body of Christ's teaching, exemplified in the Sermon on the Mount. It is furthermore "derived historically and religiously from the sacrificial death of Christ and from the injunction, 'If any man would come after me let him deny himself, take up his cross and follow me'. Such an ethic needs a 'social' ethic in the sense that it must give guidance not only in terms of life, for which sacrificial and forgiving love is the norm, but must also come to terms with the problem of establishing tolerable harmonies of life on all levels of community under conditions set by the fact that men are sinners. Men do not, in fact, love their fellow men. They love themselves. ... A 'social ethic' must deal, in short, with the problem of 'alter-egoism', i.e., with the fact that a community in which mutual love is the rule, rather than the exception, may, as a community become selfish, turning the love of the individual self into love of the collective self." (113)

The process of finding 'proximate' rather than ultimate norms for man's collective life involves criteria other than those found in the New Testament. In fact, Niebuhr has argued that the distinctively Christian understanding of grace and redemption "does not find place in a social ethic because it is a question whether nations, races and other groups have direct access to God, and can repent and have newness of life in the sense that individuals do." (114) Although Stone does not refer to this aspect of Niebuhr's thought, this must surely be credited as one of Niebuhr's distinctive contributions to the redefinition of the problem of Christian social ethics. He made this point cogently in his Moral Man and Immoral Society in 1934. He continued to work on the basis of this presupposition.

Christian social ethics, for Niebuhr, must include Biblical and non-Biblical sources if adequate criteria for social choice

are to be found. Herein lies one of the major sources of difference between Barth and Niebuhr. While Niebuhr would agree with Barth that there can be no specifically 'Christian Marshall Plan', or specifically Christian economic or political system either, Niebuhr parts company with Barth by insisting that criteria for Christian social ethics must be derived from Biblical as well as non-Biblical sources. In the process of finding 'proximate' norms for man's collective life the Christian cannot stand aloof, and must be involved in all the hazards that such a process involves. In an essay "Barthianism and the Kingdom", Niebuhr makes clear his view that Christians are involved in these hazards:

> "All history is compromise. But the 'nicely calculated less and more' with which we must deal when we deal with the ethical problems of history is really important. Any religious idealism which absolves us of responsibility for finding the best possible means to the highest possible social end is dangerous to the moral struggle." (115)

What then are the sources from which a Christian social ethic must be derived? How does Niebuhr, in fact, derive his criteria for social choice? Perhaps the clearest summary of his own position is to be found in an essay: "Theology and Political Thought in the Western World":

> "If we fully analyze the complex relation which exists between religious and rational factors in the establishment of justice, we must come to the conclusion that two elements are equally necessary for the solution of the problems of the human community. One is a proper reverence for factors and forces which are truly absolute; and the other is a discriminate attitude toward relative and ambiguous factors and forces. As Christians we insist that there be a proper reverence for the absolute factors, which might be enumerated as: (1) The authority of God; beyond all human and historic authorities, enabling us to defy those authorities on occasion with a resolute 'We must obey God rather than men.' (2) The authority of the moral law embodied in the revelation of Christ, which is to be distinguished from any particular version of that law which may have evolved historically, including the different versions of 'natural law'. (3) The insistence upon the 'dignity' of the person which makes it illegitimate for any community to debase the individual into a mere instrument of social process and power and try to obscure the fact of his ultimate destiny, which transcends all historic realities. This acknowledgement of the 'dignity' of man must be accompanied in Christian thought by a recognition

> that this precious individual is also a sinner, that his lusts and ambitions are a danger to the community; ... (4) Reverence for the 'orders' of authority and social harmony which have actually been established among us, beyond the wisdom of men and frequently by providential working in which 'God hath made the wrath of man to praise him!'
>
> Every one of these 'absolutes' is in danger of corruption; which is why we cannot speak so simply of Christian 'civic virtue'." (116)

In an article in honour of Rauschenbusch written about the same time as the essay from which we have just quoted (1957), Niebuhr acknowledges that one of the genuine achievements of the Social Gospel was the rediscovery of the Hebrew prophets as 'teachers of social righteousness'. The Social Gospel school recognized the "importance of the prophetic insistence on social righteousness and on collective morality. That insistence makes the Old Testament a perpetual resource for a Christian social ethic, and raises the question, whether in the history of Christianity ethics as distinguished from theology can ever develop an adequate social ethic if it neglects the Old Testament prophetism. For without the Old Testament witness, the moral tension between Christ and the world, as explicated in the New Testament, is always in danger of creating or of providing an escape for the tension in either the asceticism of the medieval church or the pietistic individualism of Protestantism." (117)

The question with which we began our study was whether it is possible to deduce courses of social action from the faith. Niebuhr's response would be qualifiedly affirmative. The qualification would, in part, be his insistence that the Hebrew prophetic witness recorded in the Old Testament must be an important resource for social ethics: that 'faith' must be understood as including the Hebraic faith exemplified in the prophetic tradition. His qualification would also comprise his insistence that the biblical-Christian tradition cannot alone provide criteria for social choice. The resources of philosophy and the human sciences are necessary if a Christian social ethic is to be adequate. Realism, he would insist, "emphasizes justice through either conflict or equilibrium because of the perpetual character of human self-interest, particularly collective self-interest." (118) For this reason Niebuhr would hold that a Christian social ethic must avail itself of non-Biblical instruments for the calculation

of competing rights and interests, and that the methods of the human sciences must be used in determining the nature and structure of the given situation in which decisions must be made.

In this and preceding chapters we have analyzed those aspects of Niebuhr's theology which form the basis of his approach to social ethics. We have examined his understanding of God as the symbol of mystery amd meaning; his view of man's 'dignity' and sinfulness; his conception of the Christ-event as the revelation of divine suffering love - the ultimate norm for human conduct; and his understanding of the Hebrew prophetic movement. These are his Biblical-Christian resources for social ethics. It is not necessary, therefore, to elaborate these resources here. What is important to note is that these aspects of his theology are constituent parts of Niebuhr's method of doing social ethics.

Another constituent part of his method is his pragmatism. In fact, Ronald Stone considers Niebuhr's pragmatism to be so important that he devotes a whole chapter of his book on Niebuhr to what he calls "A Pragmatic-Liberal Synthesis in Christian Political Philosophy." Stone adopts a developmental approach in analyzing Niebuhr's thought in a manner similar to the one we adopted in Chapter Two of this work. However, what we have called Niebuhr's 'Mature Years': the period during which he worked from the basis of Christian Realism, Stone divides into two periods. The latter being the period during which, according to Stone, Niebuhr develops a "pragmatic-liberal synthesis". Stone has good grounds for this approach because it was in the 1950's that Niebuhr returned to political liberalism: not the idealistic liberalism of Wilson which influenced him in his youth, but the pragmatic liberalism of the Roosevelt era in American politics.

Though it was not always manifest, Niebuhr's debt to pragmatism can be seen in all phases of his thought. As Stone says:

> "The philosphy of William James had been important to Niebuhr as a young student, and Niebuhr's methodological presuppositions continued to reveal the influence of James. In the 1930's Niebuhr co-operated with and argued against John Dewey. In the 1940's he came to appreciate the pragmatic liberalism of President Roosevelt. In the 1950's he explicitly advocated Christian pragmatism." (119)

In the same essay where he enumerates the "absolutes" essential for Christian social ethics, Niebuhr defines "Christian Pragmatism" thus: "'Pragmatism' has been a Schimpfwort in Christian circles for some time. How then do we arrive at a 'Christian' pragmatism? One can answer that question very simply by the assertion that Christian pragmatism is merely the application of Christian freedom and a sense of responsibility to the complex issues of economics and politics, with the firm resolve that inherited dogmas and generalizations will not be accepted, no matter how revered or venerable, if they do not contribute to the establishment of justice in a given situation." (120) Niebuhr's pragmatism, tempered as it is by his theological presuppositions, is characterized by a rejection of ideologically conceived political systems. He insisted, therefore, in judging institutions of government on the basis of their usefulness for man's collective life. What might be termed 'utility in the service of justice' was the criterion by which he judged political institutions.

It is important to note that in order to find a basis for social ethics Niebuhr believed that theological "absolutes" and non-theological principles should be held in balance with pragmatic interests. This attempt to hold in balance theological and non-theological principles with pragmatic concerns in political judgement marks another important difference between his method and that of Barth. The controversy which ensued between Barth and Niebuhr over the Hungarian crisis in 1956 exemplifies this. Niebuhr criticized Barth for his "extreme pragmatism, which disavows all moral principles. ... Without the guidance of principles and looking at every event afresh in the light of the Word of God, Barth comes to the capricious conclusion that Communism is not as bad as Nazism because it is not anti-Semitic. ... A little concern for 'principles' would have instructed Barth that some of the Barbarism of Nazism was derived from the same monopoly of irresponsible power from which the barbarism of Communism is derived. Looking at every event afresh means that one is ignorant about the instructive, though inexact, analogies of history which the 'godless' scientists point out for our benefit." (121)

Niebuhr, embracing the Christian tradition, being moved by his pragmatic concern for justice from idealism to realism, finding

in that tradition a strong stream of realism - running from the Hebrew prophets, the New Testament, through Augustine to the Reformers - was both confirmed in his realism and led to recover that element in the tradition from erroneous romantic, Enlightenment, and nineteenth century views. 'Christian Realism', therefore, signifies both a method which brings the Christian tradition into interplay with the realities of the time, and also the realism of the Christian tradition in which he stood. For example, his emphasis on the fallen state of man was his rediscovery of the realistic nature of the Christian tradition. The consequences which he drew for democracy from this emphasis are indicative of his method.

With some important reservations, Niebuhr's methodology is not unlike that of the Hebrew prophetic method which we examined in Chapter One. There we noted that the prophets deduced courses of social action from history. They did so on the basis of their understanding of history as the 'arena' of God's action, revelatory of his nature. They were able, therefore, to 'read-off' from contemporary history what God was doing, and therefore what Israel ought to be doing. The basic 'clue' with which they interpreted the events of their time was their understanding of God deriving ultimately from the Sinai-complex of events in their history.

Niebuhr stands within a tradition which not only tells him that God is at work in history, but also deduces from that history the character of that God. Thus, for Niebuhr, justice is the social expression of agape because God reveals Himself as Judge. Contemporary history, which we understand to include the events, institutions, and intellectual achievements of a specific period, is allowed to interact with the Biblical-Christian tradition. In that interaction the tradition is at times modified because it no longer 'fits' the facts of contemporary experience. Niebuhr's assertion that a radical distinction between natural and human history must be made, is an instance of such a modification of the tradition. On the other hand, there are times when the tradition provides him with the criteria for a radical criticism of the prevailing optimism which characterized the early part of this century.

Niebuhr has been criticized for the scant attention he appears

to give to the church in his writings. It has been argued that the question of the Church is an "undeveloped area of his thought" and a "critical omission in Niebuhr's social picture of redemption." (122) It is significant, as D.B. Robertson points out, that the Living Library Volume on Niebuhr includes no chapter on his thought about the Church. But as Robertson argues, Niebuhr has given a "rather large amount of attention to the church" and shows that "he also values the institution more highly and positively than his reputation would seem to allow." The greater part of what Niebuhr has written on the church is to be found in his "fugitive essays", scattered through a dozen magazines and journals. (123) Robertson has in fact corrected the situation by collecting most of Niebuhr's essays on the church and publishing them in Essays In Applied Christianity. In that volume Niebuhr's writings are brought together and grouped into five divisions: aspects of common worship in American churches; the faith of the church and specific moral issues; Niebuhr's controversy with Barth; an analysis and criticism of Catholic views of the church and of natural law theory; and finally a section on Niebuhr's writings on the ecumenical movement.

It is beyond the scope of this work to enter into a discussion of Niebuhr's understanding of the Church, except insofar as this affects his theological method. It is true that Niebuhr has written extensively on the church. He speaks appreciatively of the church as "that place in human society where men are disturbed by the Word of God"; where "the word of mercy, reconciliation, and consolation is heard"; where "the Kingdom of God impinges upon all human enterprises"; as a "community of hopeful believers"; and as "community of forgiven sinners". He is also critical of the church. He sees it as sharing the tendency of all institutions to choke creativity; to be tempted to self-righteousness; and not to understand "as well as the prophets of Israel understood how severely the judgement of God falls upon the community which is the bearer of the judgement." (124)

It is, we believe, true that Niebuhr has no explicit parallel in his method to the role played by the covenant community in the Hebrew prophetic method. He does not see, as Lehmann does, the need for the role of a koinonia in his method. Lehmann speaks of a theonomous conscience operating within a three-fold context

comprising the Church (koinonia), the Faith (the Biblical-Christian tradition), and the objective situation. Whereas Niebuhr's method involves an interaction between Faith (including non-Biblical resources) and the objective situation for ethical decision-making, without any explicit role being given to the Church. This is not to say that Niebuhr had no appreciation of the Church, but rather that he gave no specific place to the role of the Church in his method. Whatever the difficulties in Lehmann's approach,[125] in methodology he does posit the need for koinonia both as a 'conscientizing' community and as an enabling community in which ethical decisions can be made. This koinonia we understand to be Lehmann's counterpart of the Hebrew covenant community out of which the prophets operated.

The fact that Niebuhr makes little explicit provision for a form of community of faith in his methodology for social ethics is a serious gap in his thought. Perhaps this omission accounts for the absence of any serious discussion of conscience in Niebuhr's thought. If we accept Fletcher's view that conscience is a function of the self rather than a faculty of intuition within the self,[126] then the necessity for some form of community becomes imperative. It becomes necessary to ensure that a community exists in which a 'conscientizing' process is encouraged, whereby the moral values and notions of reality are shared and transmitted from generation to generation. Understood sociologically, this is surely how the Hebraic covenant community functioned. Should such a community cease to exist it is hard to see how the prophet could be heard. The role of the koinonia in Lehmann's method recognizes this need.

The need for some form of community as a constituent part of the process of ethical thought and ethical decision-making is necessary for another equally important reason. Most of our social problems today are so complex that is is hard enough to locate the problem in the first place, let alone identify the causes. As sociologist Peter Berger puts it:

> "Our social problems today typically consist of the clash of highly organized interests, with well-meaning individuals caught on both sides in the logic and sometimes the ideology of their

> respective positions. Also, these problems are characterized by a high degree of incommunication between the groups and individuals participating in them. In many such instances, the classical approaches of 'social action' fail even to get off the ground. One may not even know where one's action could begin. For example, most situations of industrial conflict in America today are far too complex for these old approaches. They involve highly complicated economic and political relationships, which are very difficult to separate in terms of what is morally desirable or undesirable. In the early days of labor organization in America, when there were clear issues of economic exploitation and human indignity in almost every labor dispute, involvement in terms of 'social action' may have been relatively easy for Christians. Today, more likely than not, these disputes do not involve economic issues at all. It is very hard for a consistent moralist to make decisions in disputes involving minutiae of work rules or job categories or in jurisdictional quarrels between rival unions. The temptation is close then simply to abandon such problems to the forces of the social situation, giving up the attempt to engage the situation in terms of Christian ethics at all. To yield to this temptation, however, is to say that the Christian faith is irrelevant to what are the crucial concerns of most men in industrial society." (127)

This description of the complexity of modern social problems could be reproduced many times. Any serious attempt, therefore, to contribute towards the problem-identifying and problem-solving process necessitates some form of community in which this can be done. The "Academy Movement" in Germany is an outstanding example of an attempt by the Church to create such a community in which the complex problems which confront modern man can be discussed and proximate solutions found. The experience of the European "Academies" has been that it is possible for men of good-will, Christian and non-Christian, to establish a fellowship of agreed principles out of which proximate solutions to particular problems can emerge. In this process not only has the Church learned to listen sympathetically to the complex issues which confront men in society, but it has also discovered that the Biblical-Christian tradition recommends itself to those who feel 'the care of the world' to be their care.

Our criticism that Niebuhr makes no explicit provision in his methodology for a Lehmann-type <u>koinonia</u> should not obscure the

fact that he appeared always to operate out of some form of community. Some form of 'fellowship of agreed principles' was always important to Niebuhr. This can be demonstrated by reference to virtually every period of his life and thought. As we indicated in Chapter Two, Niebuhr belonged to various 'fellowships', and operated at his best when in a stimulating group which shared similar aims to those he espoused.[128] Thus, whereas Niebuhr makes no provision for community in his explicitly methodological statements about social ethics, in point of fact he always operated out of some form of community. Community is implicit in his method.

All thought on social and political problems will remain indebted to Reinhold Niebuhr. His seminal contribution to social ethics has redefined the boundaries of Protestant ethical thought and given fresh impetus to social ethics. The problems which we have discerned in his approach are a challenge to improve on his method, and to engage in creative work at the frontiers which his contribution has enabled us to perceive more clearly.

Niebuhr himself was unsatisfied with aspects of his approach to the end of his life. In an interview, given in 1969, when in retirement and ill-health he speaks of his dissatisfaction:

> "We've had this long history of realism, Christian and non-Christian, and it's an interesting thing to me that many of my non-Christian realist friends like Hans Morgenthau were particularly anxious to say that they agreed with me, though they did not share my 'theological convictions'.
>
> The fact was - and this was my great offence - my theological convictions to them were positively irrelevant. I used the doctrine of original sin as a symbol of the perpetual, universal charater of self-interest. ... I thought in my Gifford Lectures that I had made the doctrine of original sin acceptable both by disavowing the historicity of the Garden of Eden story and by disavowing Augustine's rather horrible doctrine of the transmission of original sin through sexual lust in the act of procreation. I thought this cleansed the doctrine for the modern mind, as well as making it relevant, but it didn't.
>
> Intellectual life as well as political life uses all kinds of symbols and myths, and for good and bad reasons people accept or reject these symbols and myths. In other words, I think I was right in my realism, and in my theology, but wrong in

my pedagogy." (129)

This 'admission' illustrates both his unhappiness with aspects of his approach, and his characteristic humility. The interview also serves to illustrate how important it was for him that the Christian faith should be made relevant. What Niebuhr identifies as his mistaken pedagogy was of concern to him because it constituted a failure in the apologetic task. If he was convinced that he was right in his realism and in his theology, was he right in assuming that the failure to make the Faith relevant was simply mistaken pedagogy? If he used pedagogy in the dictionary sense of the "science of teaching", then the question is surely not simply a matter of how he taught but also what he taught? Granted that the use of myth and symbol as such was not in question, why was the symbol of 'original sin' not relevant for non-Christians like Morgenthau?

We have noted that his latest book Man's Nature and His Communities (1965) attempts to correct his "pedagogical error". (130) Niebuhr is prepared to exchange the symbol 'original sin' for self-interest. In this latter he might have had the agreement of secular realists, but it does not express an essential quality which the former does; namely, the view that sin is rebellion against God. The question remains whether the essential task is to arrive at consensus with secular realists, or whether it is to promote faith in God. These questions serve to introduce us to an analysis of Niebuhr's method as a Christian apologist.

(b) The Apologetic Task

It is not possible to understand Niebuhr's thought without recognizing that an integral part of it was his apologetic interest. Although critical of Niebuhr's approach, evangelical theologian Donald Bloesch recognizes this when he writes:

> "His basic concern has been to establish the eternal relevance of the Christian faith to a secularized and disillusioned culture. At the same time he has sought to eschew the errors of the early apologists which resulted in a biblical-classical synthesis as well as the errors of Protestant liberalism which transmuted biblical faith into either an idealistic or naturalistic philosophy of religion. Niebuhr has exerted a profound influence not only upon the religious thought

> of our time but also upon modern secular and political thought. ...
>
> (However) Niebuhr's method has convined many agnostics of the credibility of the Christian view of man, but they generally remain agnostic concerning the saving work of Christ. Many of his hearers will accept the Christian understanding of sin and even the possibility of the existence of God, but they will not commit themselves to the living Christ. Thus has been born the phrase 'the atheist followers of Niebuhr'." (131)

Humility may have prevented Niebuhr from accepting Bloesch's evaluation of his "basic concern" because of the commendatory nature of the first paragraph, but he would have agreed with Bloesch's description of that concern. He would, no doubt, have been pleased with the phrase: "the atheist followers of Niebuhr." Pleased, in the sense that his basic concern was to establish the relevance of the Christian faith. He therefore valued the company of those who could not accept his theological convictions. He exhibited a certain 'nonchalance' about the outcome of his efforts to establish the relevance of the faith. His nonchalance, however, did not mean that where he felt the failure to do so was his, he did not try to correct his position. Nonetheless, he would insist that ultimately faith cannot be made rationally compelling, in the sense that men can be 'argued' into faith. He also insisted that the relevance of the Christian faith can be demonstrated to secular man. In this connection, Bingham draws attention to the fact that Niebuhr has expressed gratitude to analytic philosophy's contribution to the apologetic task. Writing in "The Christian Century", May 1960, he says:

> "I believe that the emergence of philosophical analysis ... has made our apologetic task simpler by emphasizing that in the Christian drama we are dealing with a system of meaning for which no irrefutable rational proof can be given but to which we must bear witness by the quality of our lives." (132)

In his understanding of the perennial problem for Christian faith of the relation between faith and reason Niebuhr is Augustinian in his approach. Faith is not reason, and precedes reason (fides praecedat rationem.). But, in the sense that reason can help to persuade a man to faith, it is antecedent to faith. Niebuhr writes:

> "... historic revelations can be related speculatively to the various aspects of human existence and can make sense out of them. Reason can thus follow after faith. It can also precede it, in the sense that a highly sophisticated reason can point to the limits of rational coherence in understanding contradictory aspects of reality ...
>
> ... on the positive side we are where we have always been. Faith is not reason. It is the substance of things hoped for, the evidence of things not seen." (133)

Two factors have emerged from our discussion of Niebuhr as apologist: his concern to establish the relevance of the Christian faith, and his belief that reason and revelation are not mutually irreconcilable.

When we speak of Niebuhr as apologist it should be noted, however, that he cannot be included in that category of apologists who attempt to build a theological system on the foundations of the dominant motifs of the age in which they lived. That is to say, there are those who have understood the apologetic task to mean the defence of the Christian faith by means of a re-interpretation of the faith in terms of the philosophical and cultural milieu of the time. Alan Richardson's chapter on "Reinhold Niebuhr As Apologist" in the Living Library Volume indicates the sense in which Niebuhr cannot be called an apologist:

> "The title of this essay must in one sense be considered misleading. An apologist in the strict sense of the word is one who seeks to make sympathetic contact with the thought of his age with a view to commending Christian truth to his contemporaries and defending it against hostile criticism. It is clear that Reinhold Niebuhr does not set out in the deliberate fashion of other apologists to do this. He is far too critical of the presuppositions of our age to be a conventional apologist. ...
>
> ... If Niebuhr had been an apologist in the normal meaning of the word, he would have sought to build on the apparently solid foundation ... provided by liberal thought for the super-structure of the Christian religion ... One could illustrate the process from the work of all the great Christian apologists down the ages: Aquinas's building upon the new and fashionable Aristotelian categories of the thirteenth century renaissance; Joseph Butler's appeal to the deistical presuppositions of eighteenth century rationalism; ..... " (134)

If we accept, for the purposes of analysis, Richardson's description of the apologetic task in the normal sense of the

word, then it is clear that Niebuhr does not use what might be termed the "direct method" of an Aquinas, or a Butler. He has in fact indicated that he stands in a tradition which includes Augustine, the Reformers, Pascal, and Kierkegaard. He distinguishes another tradition which includes Origen, Aquinas, and the Renaissance Humanists.(135) His apologetic approach can be described as employing the "indirect method" which is discernible in the thinkers in whose tradition he stands.

(1) THE INDIRECT METHOD

In his apologetic method Niebuhr stands in the Kierkegaardian tradition, though he is not uncritical of Kierkegaard's method. His criticism of Kierkegaard, as we have seen, related to his failure to take history seriously and his tendency to make faith and reason too radically contradictory. But Niebuhr is Kierkegaardian in the sense that his apologetic method consisted not in making Christianity plausible, but in demonstrating its relevance over against the illusions which tend to obscure the truth of Christian faith for his contemporaries. Kierkegaard was critical of the speculative idealism of Hegel, and of the mediating theology which sought to combine the insights of Hegalianism with biblical insights. Bloesch has summarized Kierkegaard's apologetic as entailing the "removal of the illusions which keep men from treating Christianity seriously. Kierkegaard proceeded to puncture the idolatry in the theology and philosophy of his time; the principle illusion that must be shattered is the belief that we are already Christians. ... (He further believed that) 'The communication of Christianity must ultimately end in 'bearing witness', the maietic form can never be final. For truth, from the Christian point of view, does not lie in the subject ... but in a revelation which must be proclaimed.'" (136) H.R. Mackintosh summarizes Kierkegaard's approach in these words:

> " ... Kierkegaard looked upon his own theology, he expressly tells us, as 'a corrective to things as they are'. An age of flat and craven rationalism must be stung into wakefulness; in the circumstances of the hour no place was left for timid impartiality; the crisis called for didactic hyperbole which by its sharp edge pierced to the vitals." (137)

Niebuhr saw it as his task to puncture the illusions of a culture blinded by its mood of optimism. His apologetics consisted first in a critical analysis of the culture of which he was part before pointing to the truth of Christian faith as he saw it. In this sense he saw his task as a "corrective to things as they are". The truth of Christian faith, on this view, can emerge only when the illusions under which the culture labours have been exposed. This should not obscure the fact that Niebuhr derived his criteria for refuting the illusions he discerned in modern culture from the perspective of the biblical-Christian tradition. But at this point we are concerned to show one aspect of his approach to the apologetic task: a refutation of modern illusions in order that the adequacy of the biblical-Christian tradition could be demonstrated to a secular culture. Adequacy, in the sense of providing an alternative interpretation of man's nature and destiny which 'fits' the reality men experience.

This being the case, Niebuhr would have been in substantial agreement with Whitehead's dictum: "When you are criticizing the philosophy of an epoch do not chiefly direct your attention to those intellectual positions which its exponents feel it necessary explicitly to defend. There will be some fundamental assumptions which adherents of all the variant systems within the epoch unconsciously presuppose. Such assumptions appear so obvious that people do not know what they are assuming because no other way of putting things has ever occurred to them." (138) There were two 'unquestioned assumptions' which Niebuhr found it necessary to expose. First, the assumption that because religion in general, and Christianity in particular, are based on "unscientific" presuppositions they could offer no criticism of a secular culture which understood itself to be "scientific" in nature. Second, modern culture assumed the "inevitability of progress" and the "perfectibility of man". When, from admittedly Christian presuppositions, Niebuhr embarked on a thoroughgoing criticism of the illusions of modern culture it came as a shock to those who held these unquestioned assumptions. Niebuhr records the response to his criticism in his Intellectual Autobiography:

> "The criticism of a liberal culture from distinctively Christian presuppositions, and the defence of the faith trhough an analysis of the inadequacy of the modern liberal and Marxist alternatives,

> were subject to two contrasting criticisms from secular opponents of Christianity and from the Protestant, chiefly Continental, theologians.
>
> The illusion that it is possible to have an empirical inquiry without a framework of guiding presuppositions is so widespread, particularly in America , that it is regarded as outrageous to criticize a culture from the standpoint of 'dogmatic', that is, Christian presuppositions ... Actually, no empirical observation is possible without a conceptual framework. And every rational framework points beyond itself to some framework of meaning which cannot be simply identified with rational coherence. In the natural sciences the analysis of efficient causes requires only one presupposition of faith: namely, that the operations of reason are relevant to the processes of nature; that consequently, as the Renaissance was so proud to discover, 'mathematics unlocks the mysteries of nature.' The necessary presupposition, in other words, is that the universe is orderly, and the sense of order in reason is relevant to it." (139)

Niebuhr found it necessary to attack what he discerned as the unquestioned positivist assumption in modern culture. It is the assumption, on the one hand, that the findings of the human sciences are true when they can imitate the methods of the natural sciences. It is the assumption, on the other hand, that specific inquiry ruled out "dogmatic" presuppositions; especially explicitly religious ones.

Niebuhr called this unquestioned assumption one of the "prejudices" of a "naive" culture. Throughout his life he found it necessary to expose and counter it. His first book Does CivilizationNeed Religion? (1926) sketches his position over against the notion of presuppositionless science, and contends that Man's nature and the character of human history are such that no scientific description of the facts of that nature and that history can adequately 'explain' them. In his much later "Faith and the Empirical Method in Modern Realism" in Christian Realism and Political Problems (1953), Niebuhr agrees that the idea of a "presuppositionless science of human affairs is one of the points where the humanities have been unduly influenced by the physical sciences, or have falsely attempted to transfer the methods of the latter to the former realm." The study of man, he continued, must take into account that he is both a creature and a creator "who does not fit easily into any system of

rational or natural coherence." (140) This is not to say that the human sciences are of no value. On the contrary, Niebuhr insisted that they are indispensible aids in helping us understand what things are and how they came to be what they are in history and in nature. But the scientific understanding of man's nature and his history tends to obscure the fact that these are more complex than modern culture is willing to recognize. Realism will make use of the findings of the human sciences while at the same time recognizing that the whole truth cannot be contained in such findings. He summarizes his position in the following way:

> "Historically we live in a world in which evil and good are embattled in such a way as to illumine the terrible depths and the awful heights of the human enterprise. Because man in his grandeur and in his misery, in his high aspirations and in their egoistic corruption, is and always will be a more complex creature than modern culture has understood, his history is more tragic and his redemption from self-seeking, whether individual or collective, more difficult and always less final than we have assumed. The dimension of this whole scene is so great than only the judgement and the grace of God can give it a frame of meaning." (141)

The other unquestioned assumption of modern culture which he devoted a lifetime to exposing, Niebuhr summarized in his Intellectual Autobiography:

> "The faith of modern man contains two related articles: the idea of progress and the idea of the perfectibility of man. The latter is frequently the basis of the former article. Man is regarded as indeterminately perfectible because it is not understood that every growth of human freedom may have evil as well as virtuous consequences. The root of this error is that reason is identified with freedom, and it is not seen that reason may be the servant, rather than the master, of the self. This essential religion of modernity is no less 'dogmatic' for being implicit rather than explicit, and it is no more true for being arrayed in the panoply of science." (142)

In this regard Niebuhr argued that it is incumbent upon modern culture to examine the Christian analysis of man's nature and history because modern estimates are not only illusory themselves, but more important, they are fraught with danger. Modern culture, writes Niebuhr, despite all of its "boasted empiricism" has been

caught in "some obvious miscalculations and even in some tragic errors." The world, he continues, is not "at all as the eighteenth century hoped it would be if men would only disavow their irrelevant other-worldly hopes and expend all their energies on the perfecting of man and his society. The simplest way of defining this contradiction between past hopes and present realities is to call attention to the fact that the heaven on earth of modern man turned out to be more incredible than the old heaven; and much more dangerous." (143)

We have argued that Niebuhr's apologetic method is Kierkegaardian in the sense that it comprises an attempt to puncture the illusions of modern culture in order to show that the moral tradition in which he stood - Christian Realism - offers a more adequate means of interpreting the human situation. This method we have described as 'indirect'. However, this should not be understood to mean that, in the dictionary definition of the word 'indirect', Niebuhr is circuitous or oblique in his apologetic method. We use the word to indicate the sense in which Niebuhr builds his apologetic by exposing what he believes are the illusory and dangerous fallacies inherent in the presuppositions of modern culture.

A developmental analysis of Niebuhr's thought will indicate the manner in which he operated. During his formative years at Union he made extensive use of the symbol of 'original sin' to point to the pervasive character of human self-interest and particularly of collective self-interest. Although he later expressed reservations about his use of this symbol he nevertheless applied it with rigour in a situation predisposed to believe in man's perfectibility and in the inevitability of progress. It is now clear that he succeeded in making his point. The liberal camps in theology and in politics were forced to take him seriously. Events in history, including a World War and the rise of Communism, corroborated his view that a culture which succumbs to such illusions pays too high a price for its illusions, because it fails to make provisions for adequate safeguards against abuse of power, and does not take seriously enough the character of collective self-interest.

Far from taking the notions of man's perfectibility and the inevitibility of progress as the bases from which to build a

theology, Niebuhr saw it as a necessary part of his apologetic task to expose these "naive" notions in the process of arguing that the tradition in which he stood offered more adequate alternatives. It is in this sense that we describe his methodological approach as an indirect one. He was of course aware that the defeat of one set of presuppositions about man's nature and destiny will not necessarily effect an acceptance of another set of presuppositions, Christian or otherwise.

During the period when the New Deal and Fair Deal policies were being pursued with some success in America, and a long 'cold war' ensued between his country and Russia, Niebuhr developed the tool of irony as an apologetic weapon. From our analysis of his use of irony it is clear that this was no mere literary device. He saw it as his apologetic task to point up the ironies in the struggle between these two 'superpowers', and argued that an ironic view of man's individual and collective self-interest is normative in the Biblical-Christian tradition. As he saw it, the stakes were high and the illusions inherent in the strengths of both nations were of such an order that they needed to be exposed if the world was to achieve an equilibrium of power in the "nicely calculated less and more" of that historical situation. His use of irony as an apologetic tool may be adduced as further evidence of the indirect apologetic method which was characteristic of his approach.

Niebuhr's apologetic method is likened by Richardson to the role of the Hebrew prophet. Richardson argues that the prophet calls into question the assumptions of his day, and thereby draws attention to the truth of the tradition in which he as prophet stands. Describing Niebuhr's thought in this regard, Richardson writes:

> "If we are looking for an epithet by which to describe him the word that comes to mind is not 'apologist' but 'prophet'. In an important sense a prophet's function is exactly the opposite of an apologist's: instead of making sympathetic contact with the thought of his age the prophet is compelled by an inner necessity to criticize and reject it. A prophet will not compromise with the accepted thought forms and presuppositions of his day, since they appear to him to be idolatries; he exposes their inadequacy and hypocrisy, and he remorselessly drives those who will listen to his proclamation to seek for new and more

> adequate forms of understanding. Niebuhr is clearly a prophet in this sense: in an age of the dominance of the categories of 'liberal' and 'evolutionary'thinking he has compelled serious-minded people to criticize their assumptions and to look for new and deeper ways of understanding their experience.
>
> But there is a sense in which the prophet inevitably performs the work of an apologist, whether he intends to do so or not. The prophet by the startling and compelling quality of his utterance arrests men's attention and compels them to consider afresh the basic truths of the Biblical revelation and their implications for the life of man and of society. ... It may be true that the number of those who have been thus awakened by Niebuhr to a new and realistic awareness of the nature of Christian truth is not very large; but in matters of this kind the size of the prophet's following is not important; in every age it is only a handful of thoughtful people who create the 'climate of opinion' and shape the outlook of the oncoming generation." (144)

Now it may be more accurate to describe Niebuhr's method as that of a prophet rather than that of an apologist in the sense in which the apologetic task is sometimes understood; namely, the building of a theological framework on the dominant motifs of the age. But there is an important sense in which Richardson has oversimplified the prophet's mode of operation and also Niebuhr's method. It is true that the prophet will not compromise with the accepted presuppositions of his age where he discerns these to be idolatrous in character. But it is surely not accurate to claim that the prophet stands over against the thought-forms of a particular age. In principle such thought-forms are not ruled out as being irrelevant in the prophetic method. The prophet does not come to contemporary history with a set of fixed presuppositions or 'absolutes' which he proclaims over against his age. It is true that the prophet is often seen to be against the mainstream of thought in his time. But this is because he discerns illusory and idolatrous trends in the contemporary situation which if left unchecked will lead a covenent-people into error and into a breach of covenant with God. But the prophetic view of history is a dynamic one. The prophet allowed an interplay between the understanding of the covenant-God derived chiefly from the Exodus-Sinai complex of events in Israel's history, and contemporary history. This

interplay determined the content of his message in a particular situation and dictated the course of action the covenant people should follow. The Hebrew prophet did not superimpose a set of absolutes upon a particular historical situation, but brought to bear on contemporary history the basic 'clues' about God and man derived from the tradition in which he stood. His purpose in doing so was to ask what God was doing in the contemporary situation, and to discern the course of action his people should take in obedient response to God. It is in this sense that we say the prophet took past and contemporary history seriously.

It is true that the fixed point of reference for the prophet was the understanding of God and man usually derived from the Exodus-Sinai complex of events. This was more often than not the basic 'clue' which he brought to the problem of discerning the will of God in his situation. If he discarded this clue he would step out of the tradition in which this 'clue' was fundamental. But this is not to say that the prophet understood the covenant as static and as containing all that was necessary for salvation. Because the prophet allowed an interplay between the tradition and contemporary history, new insights into the nature of God and the destiny of men were possible.

In his study on the message of the prophets von Rad makes the point that the prophet saw God's action in contemporary history as analogous with His action in the saving history of Israel. But the prophets' understanding of history was such that they also allowed the possibility that God's action in contemporary history may give birth to new insights which may surpass or supercede the old. But the new is always analagous with the old. That is to say, the new thing God was doing was understood as being analogous with the way He had acted in the past. Von Rad writes:

> "(the) correlation between the prophets and world-history is the real key to understanding them correctly, for they placed the new historical acts of God which they saw around them in exactly the same category as the old basic events of the canonical history - indeed - they gradually came to realize that this new historical action was to surpass and therefore, to a certain extent, to supercede the old. They were in fact called forth by their conviction that Yahweh was bringing about a new era for his people...

> ... Even so, the specific form of the new thing which they herald is not chosen at random; the new is to be effected in a way which is more or less analogous to God's former saving work. Thus Hosea foretells a new entry into the land, Isaiah a new David and a new Zion, Jeremiah a new covenant, and Deutero-Isaiah a new Exodus." (145)

This discussion of the prophetic method provides us with a clue to understanding Niebuhr's approach as an apologist. It should be noted that it was during his formative years at Union that he came to appreciate the Hebrew prophetic tradition. In Chapter Four we examined, in some detail, his analysis of myth and symbol and his appreciation of what he called the"mythical religious heritage" of the Hebrew prophetic movement. This heritage, he argued, is the basis of Christianity. For Niebuhr the important conclusions to be drawn from this mythical heritage are twofold. On the one hand, only a mythical approach is capable of picturing the world as a realm of coherence and meaning without defying the facts of incoherence. For this reason, the God of the prophetic tradition is the Creator and not the First Cause - One who gives meaning to the world. On the other hand, the mythical religious heritage gives credence to Niebuhr's thesis that the process by which the Hebrew tradition was formed was ethical rather than rational. By this he means that the truth contained in the "myths of permanent validity" are ethically motivated. The Hebrew, argued Niebuhr, was less concerned to provide a rationally satisfying explanation of the world than he was to find a morally relevant way of acting in the world.

In his apologetic method Niebuhr is not unlike the Hebrew prophet. He is critical, for example, of what he calls Barth's "dogmatism" because he tends to bring to the contemporary situation a dogmatic formulation of the Faith which will not and cannot be corrected by that situation. Niebuhr believed that the alternative to the Barthian approach is a theology corrected by contemporary thought and experience, and therefore a theology which cannot altogether escape the problem of relativity. Writing in 1928 in an essay entitled "Barth - Apostle of the Absolute", published soon after Barth's Das Wort Gottes und die Theologie appeared in an English translation, Niebuhr criticizes him and thereby gives an indication of his own position:

> " ... in the sense that it (Barth's theology) is an effort to escape relativism through dogmatism it is a new kind of fundamentalism or an old kind of orthodoxy. It is, in fact, a revival of the theology of the Reformation, Calvinistic in its conception of God and Lutheran in its emphasis upon the experience of justification by faith.
>
> ... In order to escape the relativism of a theology which is based upon and corrected by biology, psychology, social science, philosophy, and every other field of knowledge, we accept a theology which has no way of authenticating itself except by the fact that it meets a human need ...
>
> ... But ultimately there is no more peace in dogmatism than in magic. We can escape relativity and uncertainty only by piling experience upon experience, checking hypothesis against hypothesis, correcting errors by considering new perspectives, and finally letting the experience of the race qualify the individual's experience of God." (146)

By inference and by contrast it is clear that Niebuhr is willing to hold a position in which theology is corrected by the natural and human sciences. In this sense we believe Niebuhr is true to the Hebraic tradition, exemplified in the prophets, in which there is an interplay between theology and contemporary experience. Relativity and uncertainty will always dog the path of such a theological position. But Niebuhr is akin to the prophet in that he avows it is by "piling experience upon experience, checking hypothesis against hypothesis, correcting errors by considering new perspectives" that we arrive at a morally relevant and adequate understanding of man's nature and destiny under God.

Elsewhere in this chapter we have analyzed the theological consequences of an important correction which Niebuhr believed it was necessary to make to the Biblical world-view under the impact of modern science: namely, his radical distinction between natural and human history. In this regard we would argue that Niebuhr is in error. But his error does not consist of making the 'correction' as such. It consists rather in the fact that the understanding of science upon which he made the correction was inadequate. The model of science with which he operated was a too-static and too-mechanistic model. In this regard we believe that he was right in his method, but wrong in the conclusions which he arrived at. His wrong conclusions were the result of an understanding of science based on a nineteenth-century mechanistic model which is now superceded. At this point he

reveals himself to be a child of his time. He should therefore not be too harshly judged for using a closed model of science which was then generally accepted.

Ian Barbour describes the rejection of a Newtonian model for a model in which the key characteristics are dynamism, complexity, and unpredictability. He writes:

> "In the Newtonian view ... nature was essentially static, with all things presumed to have been created in their present forms. Nature was simple - reducible, that is, to a few types of entity governed by a few basic laws. Nature was deterministic, its future in principle predictable from knowledge of its present. The model of clock and clockmaker seemed entirely appropriate ...
>
> But today it appears that nature is neither static, simple, or determined. It is a dynamic process of becoming, always changing and developing, radically temporal in character. This is an incomplete cosmos still coming into being. Again, it is not simple but highly complex. The world is many-levelled; it includes many types of entity and many types of law not reducible to each other. ... Then again, nature is not determined but unpredictable. Many scientific laws are statistical and do not allow prediction of individual events." (147)

We will return to this question of a theology corrected by a more contemporary scientific view of nature later in the chapter. The point we wish to emphasize now is that contrary to Richardson's too-simple contention that Niebuhr refused to allow his theology to be corrected by contemporary thought forms, he did allow his theology to be corrected and informed by the natural and human sciences. It is our contention that in so doing Niebuhr was operating in the prophetic tradition which, again, Richardson expounds too-simplistically. It is true that Niebuhr's apologetic method involved a critique of illusory and idolatrous aspects of contemporary culture. But it also true, although Richardson fails to show this, that, in keeping with the prophetic tradition, Niebuhr did allow an interplay between faith and contemporary experience in his apologetic method. This interplay he called the "circular relation between faith and experience". This circular relation is integral to his apologetic method, and its exposition forms the basis of his defence against criticism from Continental, and mainly Barthian, theologians in his Intellectual Autobiography.

(2) THE CIRCULAR RELATION BETWEEN FAITH AND EXPERIENCE

Richardson devotes a considerable part of his essay on "Niebuhr As Apologist" to a criticism of his attitude to the miracle narratives in the Biblical record. He writes that Niebuhr is "vividly aware of the importance of history as the sphere of the saving encounter of man with God and as the locus of the Biblical revelation. At one crucial point in the discussion he becomes uncharacteristically reticent. Much of the Biblical narrative involves the miraculous, and it is not clear what is Niebuhr's final attitude toward miracle. On this matter his apologetic appears to falter." In fact Richardson continues by charging Niebuhr with "hesitation and (to speak plainly) equivocation" in his view of the historicity of the Gospel, and argues that if the element of "factuality" is surrendered in our interpretation of Creation, or the Fall, or Christ's physical resurrection, then we are left with a "new Gnosticism". He is aware that Niebuhr is himself conscious of the dangers of taking myth and history "seriously but not literally", but questions whether he has succeeded in avoiding the dangers of making Christianity into a "theistic philosophy". (148)

Niebuhr's response to Richardson in the Living Library Volume reveals a great deal about his apologetic approach. In his reply he argues that the validity of the Creation, the Fall, and redemption through Christ's Crucifixion and Resurrection are not dependent on the historicity of any of these 'events'; nor is their validity dependent on their miraculous charcter. He argues that the idea of creation is valid because it points to the mystery of divine freedom beyond natural or rational schemes of coherence. He argues that the idea of the Fall is valid, not because its historicity can be demonstrated, but because it illumines the human situation. He argues, further, that "God was in Christ reconciling the world to himself", but that this does not gain its validity from the factuality, for example, of the virgin birth. The Resurrection, Niebuhr concedes, is a more serious problem, but argues that the validity of the Resurrection is not dependent on its miraculous character. Nor is its validity questioned if, as he argues, the story of the empty tomb is an "after-thought" and the really attested historical fact is

the experience of the risen Christ among his disciples. (149)

The issues raised in this debate between Richardson and Niebuhr are large and important ones. We have examined most of them at various points in this essay. From a methodological point of view one fact emerges clearly. Niebuhr refuses to validate the truth of the Christian faith by reference to miracle, or historicity, or sacred canon. The doctrine of Creation, for example, is true - but not because it is contained in Holy Scripture. The idea of the Fall is true - but not because it can be attested historically. The disciples experience of the risen Christ is historically factual, but the truth of the Resurrection is not validated by this means.

In what sense then does Niebuhr believe the essential features of the biblical drama of God's creation, judgement, and redemption can be validated? We have more than once noted his argument that the ultimate vindication of the truth of the biblical-Christia n view lies in the "witness" of those who by faith accept this view. In this he reveals his kinship with Kierkegaard who argues that the maieutic approach must finally give way to the witness of those redeemed, and to the "proclamation" of revealed truth. That is to say, Niebuhr saw it as his apologetic task to act as a midwife by bringing into the light of day the illusory and erroneous notions hidden in the thought forms and presuppositions of his age. He also saw it as his task to indicate the way in which the biblical-Christian tradition in which he stood, modified in important aspects by the best insights of that age, offered a more adequate alternative.

In the final analysis, for Niebuhr, the truth of the Faith must be apprehended by faith and not by reason. But he argued that this is so in an ultimate sense only, and was sharply critical of those who beat a too-hasty retreat into dogmatism or subjectivism in the face of the hard question of validating the Faith in a secular age. For he believed that it is possible and necessary to demonstrate the validity of the Faith by showing its moral relevancy to contemporary issues, and by showing the adequacy of its understanding of man's nature and destiny.

The process by which he himself came to believe in the moral relevancy of the Biblical-Christian faith, he came to speak of as

the "circular relation between faith and experience." It is here that we believe Niebuhr's method holds great promise for the apologetic task, and for two reasons.

In the first place, his notion of the relation between faith and experience makes it possible to take contemporary history seriously, and therefore to allow an interplay between faith and that history. Whilst it may be less hazardous to retreat into dogmatism, on the one hand, or subjectivism on the other, his method in principle allows the possibility of a creative synthesis between the truth of the biblical-Christian tradition and the realities of contemporary experience. In this way faith and experience can 'resonate'. This, it will be recalled, comes close to what we have described as 'Adequation'.

In the second place, in his notion of the relation between faith and experience Niebuhr reveals an affinity with the scientific spirit which is predominant in our time. As such his theological method offers great promise to those who wrestle with the problem of how to communicate the Christian faith in a predominantly scientific culture. It should be noted here that there is little evidence in Niebuhr's writings that his concern with the question of validating the truth of Christian faith is motivated by philosophical concerns. He appears, rather, to be motivated by pragmatic considerations. His appreciation of the scientific milieu in which his contemporaries lived, characterized by its concern with the question of verification, influenced his search for adequate means of validating the truth of Christian faith for them. In this regard he appears to stand in the tradition of a William James rather than a Ludwig Wittgenstein.

It can be argued that there is a close affinity between the scientific and prophetic method. It is beyond our scope to enter into a discussion of the complex issues of the relationship between science and religion, in general. But it is necessary to justify the claim that there is an approximation between the Hebrew prophetic method and that of modern science. There is a close affinity between what Popper calls the "method of hypothesis" in science, and the prophetic method as we have described it in this essay. For the prophet's belief in Yahweh was tested and refined in the crucible of human experience in a manner similar to the process of empirically testing and refining an hypothesis

in scientific practise. The promise of Niebuhr's methodological approach is that his notion of the circular relation between faith and experience allows experience to test and promote the refining of the faith. He writes of the relationship between experience and the "spectacles" of faith in the search for truth, as follows:

> "Since a guiding presupposition, held by faith, acts as a kind of filter for the evidence adduced by experience, it would seem that the theologians are right, and that the modern scientists are wrong in making 'experience' a final arbiter of truth. But the matter is more complex. Guiding presuppositions do indeed color the evidence accumulated by experience; but they do not fully control experience. Presuppositions are like spectacles worn by a nearsighted or myopic man. He cannot see without the spectacles. But if evidence other than that gathered by his sight persuades him that his spectacles are inadequate to help him see what he ought to see, he will change his spectacles." (150)

Niebuhr's notion of the relation between faith and experience is crucial to his method both as an ethical thinker and as an apologist. He postulates it, as we have noted, as an answer to the critics of his Gifford Lectures. On the one hand there were those who argued that his critique of modern culture from explicitly religious presuppositions was inadmissable. He answered that presuppositionless science is impossible. His theological critics, on the other hand, argued that to make experience the arbiter of truth was erroneous because Christian truth can only be apprehended by faith. They further argued that his method of refuting illusion in modern culture was an oblique and ineffective way of pointing to the truth of Christian faith. He answered that some presuppositions of modern culture can be shown to be inadequate, and that the Christian alternative can be shown to be better.

This circular relation between faith and experience is also autobiographical. It was the process through which Niebuhr went: a process in which the presuppositions he held by faith, and the realities of his Sitz im Leben, were in constant interplay. This he acknowledged when he wrote: "It is difficult to know whether the criticisms of both liberal and Marxist views of human nature and history was prompted by a profounder understanding of

Biblical faith; or whether this understanding was prompted by a refutation of the liberal and Marxist faith by the tragic facts of contemporary history ... " (151) It would seem, therefore, that his conception of the relation between faith and experience is itself the product of that relation evidenced in his own life.

It is characteristic of Niebuhr that he changed, as it were, the prescription of the lenses in his spectacles many times. He never stepped out of the theistic tradition. But within that tradition, in its Hebrew-Christian form, Niebuhr had occasion to change the prescription of his lenses, when these no longer gave him an adequate means of 'seeing.' But the analogy of the spectacles as descriptive of Niebuhr's methodology needs to be amplified in two important respects. If we describe his theistic presupposition as the tint which his spectacles bore; even in the period when he was most influenced by Marxist philosophy, he never altered that tint. This remained the 'one thing constant' in his torturous pilgrimage. In addition, following the analogy, Niebuhr's changes of lenses always incorporated some facets of the prescription he discarded. To overlook these is to make the spectacles analogy too discontinuous.

In the 1920's, for example, the inadequacy of much of the prevailing liberal view in politics and theology caused him to change his prescription. But this does not mean that he discarded what was, for him, permanently valid in this view. Kenneth Cauthen has identified some of the major themes of liberalism which dominated American Protestant theology in the first three decades of this century. These include: an emphasis upon the authority of experience; an emphasis on ethics; a recognition of the importance of man's social environment; a confidence in reason; the devaluation of the authority of the Bible;the acceptance of historical criticism; a dynamic view of history; an emphasis on the humanity of Jesus; and a recognition of the need for toleration. (152) As we have seen, Niebuhr's major critique of liberalism, religious and secular, was aimed at its assumptions about the inevitability of moral progress: the optimistic illusion which he called "soft utopianism". But this should not obscure the fact that he remained a liberal in other important aspects; especially in his emphasis on the authority of experience and the importance of ethics.

Again, in the 1930's Niebuhr's lenses contained much that was prescribed by a Marxist view of history. The Augustinian-inspired theological critique which he brought to bear on the Marxist view does not mean that he discarded what he believed was a permanent value in this view. Ronald Stone has argued that there is "not a single important idea in Niebuhr's political philosophy that depends upon Marxist philosophy. Some ideas from his Marxist philosophy remain, but they have found independent justification in his thought." (153) This comment by Stone reflects a disposition on the part of many American commentators on Niebuhr to clear him of all traces of Marxist influence in his mature years.

It may be true that Niebuhr found independent justification for the lessons he learned during his 'Marxist phase'. But on Stone's own analysis of this phase, Niebuhr's appreciation of the problems of collective self-interest, and his break with pacifism occurred then. During the 1930's his critique of liberal illusions was made largely on the basis of a Marxist-influenced view of history. Amid a depression which highlighted the problem of the capitalist system, and in the face of a threatening international situation in which war seemed inevitable, Niebuhr argued that the only viable political alternative was a socialist one. On the other hand, the failure of socialism, highlighted in Germany in 1933 and the Moscow trials in 1937, together with his growing appreciation that the Marxist view of history was really a secularized version of the Biblical one, forced Niebuhr to a re-appraisal of his position. What was of permanent value to Niebuhr in this phase was that he was forced to a new appreciation of the Biblical view of history. By the time he had prepared his Gifford Lectures he was able to criticize both liberal optimism (soft utopianism) and Marxist optimism (hard utopianism) from a newly-won perspective. That perspective incorporated a Biblical view of man's nature and history and an Augustian-inspired theology.

It is in Niebuhr's notion of the circular relation between faith and experience that he comes closest to using what we have termed 'Adequation' as the means of validating the truth of Christian faith. Truth, on this view, lies in the adequation between faith and the facts of experience. The verification

principle operative here is not that of the positivist who argues that what is true must be capable of empirical verification; though empirical datum is taken seriously. It is not that of the dogmatic theologian who argues that what is true is what is revealed by God; though revelation is taken seriously. It is not that of the existentialist who argues that what is true is what is experienced subjectively; though subjective truth is taken seriously. Niebuhr's life and thought portray a dynamic relation between the truth revealed in the Hebrew-Christian tradition, the truth accumulated by empirical means in the natural and human sciences; and the truth as it is existentially perceived. Where the truth of the tradition and the facts of experience relate adequately, there is validation. Where the relation is inadequte, the presuppositions of the Faith and the facts of experience must be re-appraised. Precisely what constitutes an adequate relation between faith and experience is determined by the situation. It is doubtful, for example, whether Niebuhr could have developed his ironic view in his Detroit days. It is, by the same token, doubtful whether he could have developed such a notion at all were it not for his understanding of the biblical-Christian view of man's nature. Therefore, even his "handles" by which he interpreted history gain their validity not just in contemporary experience, but also under the influence of the tradition. That is to say, that even the validity of his tools is a matter of circularity.

(3) THE ROLE OF THE BIBLE IN NIEBUHR'S METHOD

It appears that Niebuhr's method, exemplified in his conception of the relation between faith and experience, is akin to what recent Biblical scholarship discerns as the method of the Biblical writers themselves. Hans-Ruedi Weber, for example, summarizes recent research regarding the nature of the interpretative process recognizable in the Bible, and suggests that contemporary interpretation should be regarded as a prolongation of this process. He writes:

> "During the last decades biblical scholars have shown clearer than ever before the ad hoc character of biblical texts. Most of these were written with concrete people, a specific time and function, in mind. The Bible therefore never provides us

> with the pure Torah (the pure will of God) or the pure Gospel, but with a plurality of Torahs and Gospels, each of them already interpreted and written in and for a specific situation. Moreover, the questions, anxieties and hopes of the first addressees influenced not only the ways in which the Torah or the Gospel were communicated, but also the content of the message, namely the particular choice of material and the emphases made ... The Bible cannot therefore be summed up in a clear statement of 'the biblical Message', because it is already a manifold tradition of applied biblical faith, written in and for manifold milieus ...
>
> ... The manifold tradition of biblical faith must also today be restated ad hoc, reinterpreted for the here and now. If we do so, the questions of our time will enable us to discover new aspects, new emphases, new exigencies of biblical faith, just as long ago when the Dueteronomic renewal movement reinterpreted the Mosaic law for its own situation, or when John restated the Gospel for his time." (154)

On the basis of Weber's exposition, there is a kinship between Niebuhr's method and that of the biblical writers. His conception of the relation between faith and experience can be described as a prolongation of the interpretative process recognizable in the Bible. Niebuhr's method is ad hoc, in Weber's sense. At specific points in his life he found certain 'centres' of biblical message to be more adequate than others as a means of interpreting the contemporary situation. The 'centres' of the biblical message which he found to be relevant in the 1950's were not those of the 1920's.

While he does not himself describe his method in these terms, it is clear that he utilized what has recently been described as "relational centres" in the biblical text to interpret events in his situation. An ecumenical report on "The Authority of the Bible" has described "relational centres" in the following terms:

> " ... biblical statements do have certain internal connections and many of these connections are directly related to central saving facts whereas others are derived from these primary statements, as conclusions from them or as fuller explanations of them ... To denote these decisive centres (we) coined the term Beziehungsmitte (relational centre). The love of God or the resurrection of Christ were (for example) regarded as relational centres from

> which the statements about eternal life follow logically." (155)

The importance of the Bible in Niebuhr's methodology has not been sufficiently stressed. Evidence of his extensive use and interpretation of biblical texts may be adduced from the large Scripture indexes in his Gifford Lectures and in his Faith and History. His many books of sermonic essays provide further proof of this fact.

Niebuhr argued that there is no one 'biblical message' or 'biblical theology' as such. In his Gifford Lectures he argues that the Reformation emphasis upon the authority of Scripture, what he calls "Biblicism", bears within it the dangers of idolatry. He argues that the authority of the Scripture must be understood in the following way:

> " ... the Bible contains the history, and the culmination in Christ, of that Heilgeschichte in which the whole human enterprise becomes fully conscious of its limits, of its transgressions of those limits, and of the divine answer to its problems. When the Bible becomes an authoratative compendium of social, economic, political and scientific knowledge it is used as a vehicle of the sinful sanctification of relative standards of knowledge and virtue which happen to be enshrined in a religious canon." (156)

On the other hand, he is equally convinced that there is a unique quality about the biblical faith when considered in its wholeness. In answer to a critic of this view, he writes: "I believe nevertheless that there is a 'Biblical' faith of great consistency and uniqueness which must be distinguished from both classical rationalism and oriental mysticism." (157) In his Faith and History he gives an instance of what is unique in the biblical record:

> " ... the Biblical concept of a divine sovereignty over individual and collective history has a unique quality. This quality is given to Biblical thought by the fact that the God who is operative in historical destiny is not conceived as the projection or extension of the nation's or individual's ideals and purposes, nor as a power co-extensive with, or supplementary to, the nation's power; nor as a force of reason identical with the Logos which the human mind incarnates." (158)

With a little care it is possible to discern that at different periods of his life certain relational centres of the biblical record became his 'clue texts' for interpreting his situation. During the early Twenties, when a pre-depression Detroit was in the process of phenomenal industrial expansion which highlighted the plight of the workers, Niebuhr regarded the ethical teaching of Jesus and of the prophets as his relational centres. He used these in conjunction with his liberal philosophy to establish criteria for social choice.

In the Thirties, when the Great Depression was at its worst and a world conflagration seemed inevitable Niebuhr, now at Union, was in the process of re-examining his position. An important factor in that process was his companionship with members of the Union faculty who introduced him to the main outlines of biblical faith and to the classical texts of Christian theology, especially the thought of Augustine. During this period he moved to the left politically, and to the right theologically. His move to the left was due largely to the influence of Marxist philosophy. His move to the right was due largely to the influence of Augustine, on the one hand, and to a different set of biblical relational centres, on the other. He came to appreciate the truth expressed in the biblical myths of Creation, the Fall, and Redemption, and to emphasize the transcendence of God, and the character of Divine love symbolized in the Cross. It was in Augustine that he found a theologian who helped him answer his many unanswered questions, and free him from the notion that Christian faith is bound up with the moral idealism of the nineteenth century.

In the post-war Forties, when the effects of Roosevelt's policies were proving their worth on the domestic front, and the colossal task of rebuilding a shattered Europe was being assumed by America, Russia and Britain, Niebuhr's Christian realist position was established. Politically he had moved beyond socialism, partly as a result of his profounder understanding of biblical faith, and partly because the tragic events of the War had highlighted for him the tyranny of Nazism and of Communism. In 1944 when an Allied victory in Europe seemed certain he wrote his defence and critique of democratic political theory, published under the title <u>The Children of Light and The Children of Darkness</u>. He conceived this volume as a corrective to the illusions which

endanger a democratic form of government, and argued in an oft-quoted aphorism that "man's capacity for justice makes democracy possible; but man's inclination to injustice makes democracy necessary." Neither idealism nor cynicism, he argued, would serve democracy well. By this stage he was using the two major biblical-Christian symbols of imago dei and 'man as sinner' as the relational centres for interpreting events in the post-war period, and as a basis for a relevant ethic for the time.

Summary:

We may summarize our discussion of Niebuhr's theological method thus far by saying that he was primarily concerned to explore the moral relevance and adequacy of the biblical-Christian tradition in which he stood. Ethical and apologetic interests characterize his writing. Any discussion of his theological method must therefore deal with both the content of his thought and the situation in which he worked. His ethical writings are not primarily concerned to build a systematic Christian ethic, but to refute error and illusions as he discerned them, and to offer another way. His apologetic writings are characterized by a similar concern. His refutation does not mean that he was unwilling to take seriously what he called "the wisdom of the world"; namely the best insights of philosophy, and of the natural and human sciences.

His ethics and apologetics are informed by a biblical-Christian tradition distilled from the nineteenth century romanticism and idealism. In that process of distillation Niebuhr was profoundly assisted by the insights of Kierkegaard, Pascal, the Reformers, and Augustine. This moral tradition he described as Christian Realism. But in the process of working out a relevant ethic for a particular situation, and working at an adequate expression of Christian faith, he allowed that moral tradition itself to be modified and complemented by the best insights of "the wisdom of the world".

As an ethicist, his method consisted in establishing criteria for social action on the basis of a confluence of a biblical-Christian tradition which incorporated a sense of transcendent providence over history, an emphasis on the dignity of man as

imago dei and the misery of man a "sinner", the Hebrew prophetic emphasis on justice as an expression of love, agape expressed in the Cross; and extra-biblical and Christian resources of the natural and human sciences.

As an apologist, Niebuhr's method consisted in refuting the illusory assumptions of his culture and showing that the moral tradition in which he stood provided more adequate alternatives. At different stages in his life he used different relational centres in that tradition in an attempt to establish a point of contact with religion's intellectual despisers. In an ultimate sense he believed that Christian truth must be apprehended by faith and not by reason. But operating at the pen-ultimate level, the validity of the Faith lay in its adequacy.

(4) TOWARDS FULLER ADEQUATION

The preliminary description of 'adequation' with which we began this chapter suggested that when the truth of the biblical-Christian tradition in which we stand, and the facts of our experience 'resonate', there is adequation. Our description of Niebuhr's theological method shows that he sought to validate Christian faith by demonstrating its adequacy for contemporary man. That is to say, there is in the interplay between faith and experience a validation of faith which is best described by the word 'adequacy'. What then is the difference between 'resonance' and Niebuhr's notion of 'circularity'? Nothing, if it were truly circular, but it fails to be this for two reasons. First because Niebuhr seems unable to live with the relativity of such a position, and from time to time seems to introduce 'faith' as some sort of 'absolute'. Second, because he fails to include a major part of contemporary experience in that which he allows to test and refine the tradition; namely, the whole realm of nature and man's contemporary grappling with it.

When we turn to a critique of Niebuhr's theology, and try to suggest reasons for the limits which are to be discerned in it, we will argue that there are shortcomings in his estimate of both tradition and experience, and in the degree to which he is prepared to rely on his own method.

Since an essential part of his method is to allow an interplay between faith and experience, his method is dogged by the problem of relativity. He was not unaware of this problem. He recognized that a theology which is corrected by the insights of contemporary experience may avoid the pitfalls of dogmatism and subjectivism, but it cannot avoid the problem of relativity. The best that can be achieved is a progressive validation by "testing hypothesis against hypothesis, by correcting errors by considering new perspectives, and finally by letting the experience of the race qualify the individual's experience of God."

Herein lies Niebuhr's promise. For in this approach truth lies in the dynamic interplay between faith and experience; it does not reside exclusively in Christian faith any more than it does in contemporary experience. Truth, on this view, is validated by its adequacy; by its 'fittingness' for a series of situations. It is a situational approach in that truth emerges from the situation; but the situation in and of itself is not the final arbiter of truth, since it is almost certain to be a compound of both truth and error. It is an historical approach in that it takes seriously the truth in past experience and seeks to relate it to the present situation. But it does not argue that all that is necessary for our salvation is contained in past experience; since the past is also compounded of truth and error. It is a dynamic approach in that it recognizes, in principle, that new truth may be apprehended in the future which may correct error in present perspectives.

The most important question that can be asked of Niebuhr's theological method, based as it is on his notion of the circular relation between faith and experience, is whether it is truly circular. If it can be shown that there are elements of the tradition which he will not allow to be tested and refined by experience, or if it can be shown that there are aspects of experience which he excludes from that testing and refining process, then Niebuhr can be criticized for failing to be consistently circular.

(a) Some Questions About Niebuhr's Notion Of 'Faith'

Niebuhr's notion of "faith" as the "sense of mystery and meaning" for which God is the symbol, has been criticized by philosophers William Dray and Hans Meyerhoff as resolving the historical paradoxes by an appeal to "faith which is the fruit of 'grace'"; by asserting that it is only from a transhistorical perspective that human life and history have meaning. A criticism of a different sort, but also related to the notion of faith, comes from Peter Berger who argues that neo-orthodoxy resolves the problem of relativity by positing 'faith' as an 'Archimedean point' in a sphere immune to relativization. We will examine these criticisms because if they are justified then it would seem that Niebuhr is unable to live with the relativity inherent in his notion of circularity.

(i) 'Faith' and History

Niebuhr's Faith and History is the basis of William Dray's analysis of his approach. Dray's major difficulty with Niebuhr relates to the manner in which Niebuhr seeks to validate his position. However, as we will show, his difficulty relates in fact to the nature of religious language. We quote Dray:

> "Christianity, he (Niebuhr) says, 'knows by faith of some events in history in which the transcendent source and end of the whole panorama of history is disclosed' ... they 'must be apprehended by faith, and can only be so apprehended in humility and repentance'. Reception of the divine revelation is itself a 'gift of grace' ...
>
> ... we need to know, not only that there are some events in history which, by exemplifying Niebuhr's theological concepts, give support to his interpretation as a whole, but also what, if it occurred, would count as evidence against that interpretation.
>
> As to (this) difficulty: a critic's suspicions may well be aroused on finding Niebuhr declaring flatly that, for the Christian, 'nothing can happen in history to shake the confidence in the meaning of existence'. It might perhaps be thought that this is nothing more than an expression of conventional piety on Niebuhr's part. Yet his treatment of historical evidence often suggests that

> it is a good deal more than this. We find him arguing, for example, of the rise and fall of cultures and civilizations ... (that) if a historica institution flowers ... it is evidence of God's grace. If it withers, it is evidence of a divine judgement upon it. This form of argument, however, makes it virtually impossible to challenge Niebuhr's providential claims; his theory appears to have defences against its overthrow built right into it. ..." (159)

Dray concludes his study of Niebuhr's approach to history by saying: "The retort may perhaps be forgiven that, as Niebuhr expounds the Christian view of history, it is that view, rather than history, which is mysterious". (160) This play on the word 'mysterious' is, on Dray's analysis, a criticism of Niebuhr's view that "the mystery of divine Providence gives meaning to history." (161)

The difficulties which Dray expresses with regard to Niebuhr's view of history, and specifically with his notion of 'faith', are of the same kind in Hans Meyerhoff's critique. Before we examine Dray's criticisms, therefore, we will quote from Meyerhoff. He writes of Niebuhr's dialectical approach to history, based on The Nature and Destiny of Man, in the following terms:

> "This dialectical approach (in which secular theories of human life and history are criticized) assumes a Christian character ... primarily - I think, because, according to Professor Niebuhr and other Christian thinkers, the historical process is not comprehensible in its own terms. ... Dialectical theology, as it is called, solves the historical paradoxes only by an appeal to faith, which is 'the fruit of 'grace'' ...
>
> ... Now, 'from such a vantage point, history is meaningful even if it should be impossible to discern any unity in its processes'. It is clear that this is a vantage point beyond history. History as well as human life have a meaning only if they be viewed from a transhistorical perspective." (162)

Meyerhoff concludes his introduction to a selection of readings from Niebuhr's Gifford Lectures on the meaning of history from a Christian standpoint by citing, with approval, the words of a critic of the Christian view of history. "Presented with such an ultimatum (that the Christian view of history is based on presuppositions held by faith), any conscientious historian" - and one might add, any conscientious philosopher - 'may perhaps be excused for protesting that this is having it both ways with a

vengeance; not everybody can bring himself to cry credo quia impossibile est'". (163)

At first reading it would appear that Dray and Meyerhoff criticize Niebuhr because his view of history is a Christian one - in which a basic presupposition is faith in a transcendent source of mystery and meaning. Since it is clear that they have difficulty with this presupposition, they are critical of the view of history expounded by Niebuhr. But this is surely not the problem, for both Dray and Meyerhoff would know that Niebuhr's Faith and History and his Gifford Lectures were written from an explicitly Christian standpoint, and for a Christian audience. In other words, they cannot be criticizing Niebuhr's interpretation of history because it is based on presuppositions held by faith; a speculative philosopher of history would readily concede that this is the case.

A closer reading of the criticism made by Dray and Meyerhoff may lead one to believe that the problem lies in Niebuhr's insistence that history can only be given meaning from a "transhistorical perspective" (Meyerhoff), and "really denies in the end that history itself is fully meaningful ... in spite of its not appearing so to us" (Dray). This insistence on Niebuhr's part, which Dray and Meyerhoff correctly interpret, is directly attributable to his view that human history is more complex than any scheme of rational coherence which we may invent in order to comprehend it, and that the sense of meaning which we give to history is based, therefore, on presuppositions held by faith. Niebuhr's presuppositions in this regard are explicitly stated. "Religious faith", he writes, "posits not only a mysterious creator God but a mysterious divine providence, which somehow brings unity into the incoherences and incongruities of man's individual and collective history ... Faith looks to an ultimate order beyond the incoherences, incongruities and cross-purposes, and creates or accepts the presupposition of a divine providence, related to the ultimate source of the temporal process." (164)

It would seem that the differences between Niebuhr and the philosophers Dray and Meyerhoff relate directly to Niebuhr's religious presuppositions. If this is the case, then Niebuhr's response would be that there is no way of fully validating the presuppositions of Christian faith except by showing their

adequacy to illumine the human situation. In the final analysis, he would argue, the Christian can only witness to the truth contained in the presuppositions which he holds by faith.

(ii) 'Faith' and Relativity

The real point of issue between Niebuhr and the philosophers is, on close analysis, not that his view of history is based on presuppositions held by faith, but that Niebuhr's notion of 'faith' appears at times to take on the character of inviolable truth, which the Christian possesses as the "fruit of 'grace'", but which the historian qua historian does not possess. Dray, for example, is critical of Niebuhr's notion of 'faith' in the meaningfulness of existence because nothing is allowed to "count as evidence against that interpretation", and because the form Niebuhr's argument takes "appears to have defences against its overthrow built right into it." Meyerhoff, in similar vein, quotes from a passage in Niebuhr's Gifford Lectures to show that faith which is "the fruit of 'grace'" takes on the character of a final court of appeal for resolving the paradoxes of human history in dialectical theology. The passage from Niebuhr which Meyerhoff quotes reads as follows:

> "By its (Christian faith's) confidence in an eternal ground of existence which is, nevertheless, involved in man's historical striving to the very point of suffering with and for him, this faith can prompt men to accept their historical responsibilities gladly. From this standpoint of such a faith history is not meaningless because it cannot complete itself; though it cannot be denied that it is tragic because men always seek prematurely to complete it.
>
> Thus wisdom about our destiny is dependent upon a humble recognition of the limits of our knowledge and our power. Our most reliable understanding is the fruit of 'grace' in which faith completes our ignorance without pretending to possess its certainties as knowledge; and in which contrition mitigates our pride without destroying our hope." (165)

Niebuhr appears here to be saying that the Christian view of history as meaningful is dependent on 'faith'. This is self-evident, for it is a Christian view of history that he is expounding. However, the difficulty arises when he says that "our most

reliable understanding" is not dependent on rational "knowledge", but on the recognition of its limits. It is the "fruit of 'grace'" which, although it cannot disguise itself as knowledge since it is held by faith, still appears to be a "kind of knowledge" which the Christian possesses but the historian qua historian does not. On this view Niebuhr appears to have created a vantage point which is closed to the historian as such; namely, "faith which is the fruit of 'grace'".

Within the language game of theology it may be accurate to describe 'faith' as the "fruit of 'grace'", but to those who do not share his presuppositions Niebuhr's exposition of faith can be misleading. 'Faith' becomes the mysterious possession of a few by "'grace'", and appears to have been elevated to a position which makes it immune to relativization.

Peter Berger has criticized neo-orthodoxy for creating a vantage point which is immune from the process of relativization. Since Niebuhr's notion of faith is open to this interpretation, and since he has acknowledged his kinship with neo-orthodoxy, it is important to examine Berger's criticism. If it can be shown that Niebuhr introduces 'faith' as some sort of 'absolute', then his method is not truly circular. Berger writes:

> "The vertigo of relativity that historical scholarship brought over theological thought may thus be said to deepen in the perspective of sociology. At this point one is not much helped by the methodological assurance that theology, after all, takes place in a different frame of reference. That assurance comforts only if one is safely established in that frame of reference, if, so to speak, one already has a theology going. The essential question, however, is how one may begin to theologize in the first place.
>
> Orthodox theological positions typically ignore this question - 'innocently' or in mauvaise foi, as the case may be ... Extreme theological liberalism of the variety that now calls itself 'radical theology' may be said to have despaired of finding an answer to the question and to have abandoned the attempt ... Between these two extremes there is the very interesting attempt, typical of neo-orthodoxy, to have one's cake and eat it too - that is, to absorb the full impact of the relativizing perspective, but nevertheless to posit an 'Archimedian point' in a sphere immune to relativization." (166)

His analysis of neo-orthodoxy leads Berger to the conclusion

that the vantage point immune to relativization "is the sphere of 'the Word', as proclaimed in the kerygma of the church and as grasped by faith." He finds corroboration for this view in neo-orthodoxy's "differentiation between 'religion' and 'Christianity', or between 'religion' and 'faith'. 'Christianity' and 'Christian faith' are interpreted as being something quite different from 'religion'. The latter can then be cheerfully thrown to the Cerberus of relativizing analysis (historical, sociological, psychological, or what have you), while the theologian, whose concern, of course is with 'Christianity' - which-is-not-'religion', can proceed with his work in splendid 'objectivity'". (167)

The question to which we must address ourselves is whether Niebuhr's notion of 'faith' is an "Archimedean point" of the sort Berger describes. It is true that Niebuhr makes a distinction between history and Heilgeschichte, for example, but he does so in a manner which cannot be construed to give to 'salvation history' an 'absolute' quality. "... while Heilgeschichte is not merely an aspect of general history, nor its natural culmination, neither is it a completely separate history. Its revelations are what give history meaning. It is not true that life would be meaningless but for the revelations embodied in Heilgeschichte. Life and history are filled with suggestions of meaning that point beyond themselves; and with corruptions of meaning due to premature solutions." (168)

It is true that Niebuhr speaks of the "self-disclosure of God in Christ" as the "final 'word' which God has spoken to man", which must be grasped by faith. (169) But he does so in a manner which cannot be interpreted as making it 'absolute'.

> "The relation between truth, apprehended in God's self-disclosure, and the truth about life which men deduce through a rational organization of their experience, might best be clarified through the analogy of our knowledge of other persons. We know what we know about other persons partly through an observation of their behaviour. ...
>
> ... (But) the other self cannot be understood until he speaks to us. Only the 'word' of the other self, coming out of the depth or height of his self-transcendence can finally disclose the other 'I' as subject and not merely as object of our knowledge. ...
>
> The word of self-disclosure is thus partly a completion of incomplete knowledge, partly a

> clarification of obscurities and partly a correction of falsifications." (170)

Niebuhr uses the analogy of the 'word' to describe the manner in which God's self-disclosure in Christ completes our "incomplete knowledge", clarifies "obscurities", and corrects "falsifications".

While Niebuhr's notion of 'faith' may appear to have the character of an 'Archimedean point', his understanding of the relation between faith and experience, in principle, precludes this. As he says in his Gifford Lectures, "the truth as apprehended by faith is not something which simple men believe upon authority and wiser men deduce from experience. For there is an element in the truth of faith which defies the wisdom of both wise and foolish, more particularly of the wise. But on the other hand a truth of faith is not something which stands perpetually in contradiction to experience. On the contrary it illumines experience and is in turn validated by experience." (171)

If Niebuhr does not make of 'faith' a vantage point immune from the relativizing process, does he not make it immune from falsification? This is, in fact, the major criticism which William Dray makes of Niebuhr: "we need to know ... what, if it occurred, would count as evidence against that (faith's) interpretation ... (his) form of argument, however, makes it virtually impossible to challenge Niebuhr's providential claims." We need to examine this criticism because, in principle, Niebuhr's notion of the circular relation between faith and experience does allow for falsification. We will do this by making a distinction between 'intellectual openness' and 'religious conviction', in order to clarify Niebuhr's position as we understand it.

(iii) Intellectual Openness and Religious Conviction

Dray, it will be remembered, stated his problem with regard to the falsification of theological language by saying that "a critic's suspicions may well be aroused on finding Niebuhr flatly declaring that, for the Christian, 'nothing can happen in history to shake the confidence in the meaning of existence'".

We have shown that Niebuhr is consistently circular in his method. That is to say, in principle he does not preclude the possibility of falsification of presuppositions held by faith.

How then can we explain Niebuhr's assertion that nothing can shake the Christian's confidence in the meaningfulness of existence? Is this assertion not an instance of making a presupposition held by faith immune to falsification?

The problem lies in Niebuhr's failure to make explicit a distinction of the sort we made in Chapter Three between 'truth within the tradition' and 'testing the tradition'. The necessity for such a distinction arises because of the difference between intellectual openness (contained in Niebuhr's notion of the circular relation between faith and experience), and religious conviction (contained in the assertion that nothing can shake the Christian's confidence in the meaningfulness of existence).

For Niebuhr the relation between presuppositions held by faith and experience is such that he cannot, in principle, be said to preclude the possibility that experience may cause him to alter his "spectacles". In this method there is intellectual openness. He would insist, however, that "it is in fact impossible to interpret history at all without a principle of interpretation which history as such does not yield ... the idea of progress or the Marxist concept of an historical dialectic are all principles of historical interpretation introduced by faith." (172) While the course of historical events does not "inevitably yield the prophetic interpretation of events", nevertheless "history does justify such an interpretation, once faith in the God of the prophets is assumed." (173)

Niebuhr's method is thus open to the possibility that events may falsify the presuppositions by which he interprets history. But he cannot predict in advance what "if it occurred, would count as evidence against (faith's) interpretation", as Dray asks him to do. The reason for this lies in what might be termed the 'existential commitment' to presuppositions held by faith which is characteristic of both scientific and religious presuppositions. It also lies in the character of religious language as such.

Intellectual openness does not mean the absence of commitment to presuppositions held by 'faith'. Philosophers of science concede this. Ian Barbour, for example, writes.

> " ... the relation between theory and observation (in science) turns out to be problematic.

> There are no bare uninterpreted data in science ... The presuppositions which the scientist brings to his inquiry influence the way he formulates a problem, the kind of apparatus he builds, and the type of concept he considers promising. Theory, in short, permeates observation. As N.R. Hanson puts it, 'all data are already theory-laden'. ...
>
> ... (There are) both subjective and objective features of science. All data are indeed theory-laden, yet observations do exert a control on theories. Paradigms are indeed resistant to falsification, yet they are not immune to cumalative pressure from discordant data and replacement by alternative paradigms." (174)

The scientist has a commitment to what Barbour calls scientific "paradigms" (such as Newton's work in mechanics) because they "involve fundamental assumptions and ways of looking at the world." (175) On Barbour's analysis, the scientific paradigm takes on the character of a 'description of reality' which must be taken seriously but not literally, until it can be shown to be an inadequate one. For this reason it is doubtful if the scientist could tell in advance what, if it occurred, could act as evidence against it, although his commitment to the paradigm does not preclude the possibility that it may be falsified on the basis of evidence not yet to hand.

Given Niebuhr's faith in a transcendent God who gives meaning to human history it is not difficult to understand his assertion, which Dray finds so problematic, that for the Christian "nothing can happen in history to shake the confidence in the meaning of existence." It may be that what Niebuhr is asserting is that the meaningfulness of existence, based on presuppositions held by faith, is for him adequate to describe the facts of experience, thereby validating those presuppositions. In other words, Niebuhr's assertion is not unlike the scientific paradigm in that it involves a fundamental assumption about the world, and describes a way of looking at the world which, for Niebuhr, has taken on the character of a 'truthful' description of reality. But the truth of this assertion is the 'conviction' which Niebuhr arrives at by means of the testing and refining process inherent in his notion of circularity. Furthermore, Niebuhr does not say that life and history would be meaningless without his presuppositions; "life and history are filled with suggestions of meaning that point beyond themselves" and thereby attest the truth of the presuppositions

which he holds by faith.

It is a characteristic of religious language that it is 'convictional'. It may be that Dray's problems with regard to Niebuhr's view of history can, in the final analysis, be ascribed to this feature of theological language. The problem which Dray has with the form of Niebuhr's argument in Faith and History is that it seems to have defences against its overthrow built into it. What Dray fails to see is that while Niebuhr is careful not to disguise 'faith' as a form of knowledge - "faith completes our ignorance without pretending to possess its certainties as knowledge" - he is nevertheless bearing witness to a 'certainty' or conviction; namely, faith in a transcendent God who gives meaning to human history. This faith has the quality of 'certainty' which, whilst it is borne out by the process of testing and refining, cannot be said to be "knowledge". In the final analysis, the maieutic form must give way to "witness".

William Horden, writing on the nature and function of religious language, analyzes the convictional nature of theological language, with reference to the work of Willem Zuurdeeg:

> "The key to Zuurdeeg's position is his concept of 'convictional language'. .... 'Conviction' is chosen for Zuurdeeg's purpose because of its Latin root, convinco which means 'to overcome, to conquer, to refute.' ... It brings out the fact that the man who speaks of his God, of right or wrong, or of something beautiful, is not describing how he feels, he is pointing to that which has 'convicted' him. What the conviction is cannot be a matter of personal taste: it depends on the nature of the 'convictor'.
>
> ... Convictions are 'sufficient grounds for action'. From convictions decisions are made and life is governed. Convictional attitude is sui generis ...
>
> ... Convictional language is as much concerned to point to reality as is empirical language. ... (It) aims to deal with 'the whole of reality', whereas science confesses that it deals only with certain relations between certain kinds of facts, that is, with a part of reality.
>
> No language can be free from convictions. In science we must extol objectivity because only by objectivity can science achieve its goals. But this does not mean that scientists are without convictions." (176)

Zuurdeeg's "convictional language" is of course an attempt to

overcome the problem of what logical positivism calls 'emotive language', with its connotations of unimportance and subjectivism. But it is not an attempt to find another word for emotive language. He believes that it is possible to use analytic philosophy to point to the nature and function of religious language as such, and believes that the term "convictional" serves this purpose.

In Chapter Three we argued that Niebuhr's methodological essay "Coherence, Incoherence, and Christian Faith" would have been strengthened had he made explicit the distinction between 'truth within the tradition' and 'testing the tradition' which is implicit in his methodology. His failure to do this leads to the kind of criticism which Dray makes of his Faith and History: it can appear as though it has defences against its overthrow built into it.

What we have said about the convictional nature of religious language, and the need to distinguish between intellectual openness and religious conviction may help to clarify Niebuhr's method. We suspect, however, that this will not satisfy Dray. For, at a fundamental level, Dray's criticism is that the form Niebuhr's argument takes "makes it virtually impossible to challenge (his) providential claims"; that is to say, the debate is not about the nature of Niebuhr's argument but about providence. If this is the case, Niebuhr's response to scientist Lawrence Kubie is apposite: "It is quite clear that for Kubie the meaning of life consists in the promise of history that scientific intelligence will gradually master everything. I think that faith is naive and he thinks my faith is incredible. I think we have the debate between historic faith and the Enlightenment in a nutshell there."(177)

Our discussion of Niebuhr's theological method thus far has been concerned with those critics who have sought to show that 'faith' is some sort of 'absolute' which Niebuhr introduces to resolve the problem of relativity inherent in his method. We have concluded that Niebuhr is truly circular in that he does not, in principle, preclude 'faith' from the testing and refining process. We have also pointed to the distinction between intellectual openness and religious conviction, believing that this may help to clarify his method.

One of the problems which occupied Niebuhr during his formative years at Union was the relation between a theology of revelation and historical and religious relativity. The manner in which he resolves the problem is contained in his notion of the circular

relation between faith and experience. H. Richard Niebuhr dealt with the problem more explicitly, and in a systematic way in his The Meaning of Revelation (1943), and Reinhold has acknowledged his indebtedness to his brother in this regard. H. Richard Niebuhr's book aims at combining the insights of Troeltsch and Barth: "it appears to me that the critical work of (Troeltsch) and the constructive work of (Barth) belong together." (178) He therefore analyzes the manner in which revelation is understood within the community of the church, and argues inter alia that:

> "Relativism does not imply subjectivism or scepticism. It is not evident that the man who is forced to confess that his view of things is conditioned by the standpoint he occupies must doubt the reality of what he sees. It is not apparent ... that one who understands how all his experience is historically mediated must believe that nothing is mediated through history ...
>
> ... If the historical limitations of all thought about God demand that theology begin consciously with and in an historical community, its limitations as an inquiry into the nature and object of faith require it to begin in faith and therefore in a particular faith, since there is no other kind of faith." (179)

Differences in temperament and interest account, no doubt, for the fact that Reinhold does not give a systematic treatment of the meaning of revelation as does his brother. Much of what is contained in H. Richard's book is assumed by Reinhold whose ethical and apologetic interests lead him to concentrate on an analysis and critique of modern culture in order to demonstrate the adequacy of the Christian alternative. For this reason we believe it is necessary to make a distinction of the sort we suggested in Chapter Three between 'truth within the tradition' and 'testing the tradition' in order to clarify what is implicit in Niebuhr's method.

There are two levels, the level of 'testing the tradition' and 'testing the truth within the tradition' which are analagous to the world-view of the scientist and the ordinary operation of the scientist within that world-view. What Niebuhr's critics are asking him to do is to use criteria which are only appropriate to the second in order to test the first, which even the scientist cannot do. In the matter of 'testing the tradition' or the world-view of the scientist there remain two levels, the one an intellectual acknowledgement that this way of saying things is not absolute

and might one day be falsified, thought it is not presently possible to say by what means. The other is the level of conviction which leads Niebuhr to function at the level of 'truth within the tradition' or the scientist to carry on with his scientific endeavour.

Having argued that on close analysis Niebuhr's method is truly circular, and that he does not inprinciple introduce 'faith' as some sort of 'absolute' which is immune from the relativizing process, we must now turn to his estimate of both tradition and contemporary experience and examine the extent to which he is prepared to rely on his own method.

(b) Towards Fuller Adequation

There are aspects of Niebuhr's estimate of both tradition and experience which neither do justice to the tradition nor 'resonate' with contemporary experience. If authority in doctrine and ethics lies in the adequation between the tradition and contemporary experience, Niebuhr's estimate of both issues is a failure in important respects to provide that adequation whereby the tradition is validated for contemporary man, and thus to provide a basis for a relevant ethic.

Niebuhr fails to include a major part of contemporary experience in that which he allows to test and refine the tradition; namely, the whole realm of nature and man's contemporary grappling with it. Niebuhr's definition of man as "radically free", while it may accord with contemporary thought, does not do justice to the biblical-Christian tradition's estimate of man. The overall sense of pessimism about man's nature and history which one gains from Niebuhr's theology can be attributed to the fact that his is a *theologia crucis* which enabled him to grapple with the issues of his time. But his pervading pessimism mutes that element in the tradition which is expressed in the Pauline text about the glory of our destiny: "creation still retains the hope of being freed, like us, ... to enjoy ... glory as the children of God. From the beginning till now the entire creation, as we know, has been groaning in one great act of giving birth; and not only creation, but all of us ... " (Rom. 8:21-23)

To gain fuller adequation these jarring notes in Niebuhr's theology will need to be corrected, and we now make some proposals concerning the way in which this may be done.

(1) Towards a theology of nature:

Niebuhr's attempt to take the natural sciences seriously caused him to propose a radical distinction between nature and history; to assert that human history contains encounters between God and man, nature being "quasi-autonomous". It is paradoxical that in his attempt to take the natural sciences seriously he 'blocked out' the whole realm of nature from his theology and left himself without criteria for grappling with the issues of science and technology. The paradox is compounded by the fact that although it is possible to identify some of the reasons for the dichotomy between nature and history in Niebuhr's theology, in principle there is nothing in his method which prevents him from embracing the whole realm of nature in that theology.

We have suggested, for example, that Niebuhr's view of science led him to conclude that nature is "less open" to "divine intervention" than the Biblical world-view presupposed. The treatment of the doctrine of Creation becomes highly symbolic under Niebuhr's hand, and turns out to be a statement about mystery and meaning to which natural and rational coherences may point, and which the transcendent God of radical monotheism symbolizes. "Blind to good and evil, omnipotent matter rolls on its relentless way" may be the words of Bertrand Russell but they express the sentiments of Reinhold Niebuhr, qualified only by his belief that "the processes of nature do not exhaust the final meaning of existence", and that nature is not omnipotent in Russell's sense but "quasi-autonomous". As we saw in Chapter Three Niebuhr's attenuated view of providence is thus open to the charge that it is a 'God-of-the-gaps'-type in the Bonhoefferian sense that "what we call 'God' is being more and more edged out of life, losing more and more ground."

So far as we can discover, there is however nothing in principle in Niebuhr's method which prevents him from including the realm of nature in his theology. First because he asserts that a "scientific and philosophical analysis of (the rational coherences of the world) is not incapable of revealing ... a profounder mystery

and meaning beyond them." (180) Taken at face value, and remembering Niebuhr's strictures against using 'coherence' as a test of truth, this statement can only mean that nature is "not incapable" of revealing God. Taken from his most methodologically explicit essay, this statement would seem to contradict the proposal he makes in that same essay that a radical dichotomy between nature and history is necessary if apologetics is to find a way forward. On the one hand the proposal lends itself to the charge of dualism and of a 'God of the gaps' while, on the other hand his statement allows the possibility that nature is revelatory of God.

The second reason why we believe that there is nothing in Niebuhr's method which precludes the embracing of nature in his theology lies in his understanding of history. History contains "symbols of transcendence", according to Niebuhr, and these symbols are not confined to the Heilgeschichte. This is perhaps Niebuhr's basic presupposition about history: the Christ-event is the primary revelatory event but "there are moments in history which are more than mere historic moments; for in them a whole course of history is fulfilled."

It is true that when Niebuhr speaks of history he usually means human history. But it is not clear to us why history should be thus confined. If nature has a history it must surely be possible to speak of nature's history as containing symbols of transcendence in the way Niebuhr does of human history.

How then can we explain Niebuhr's failure to embrace nature in his theology? For one whose formative years were spent in the shadow of the assembly line, who enjoyed owning a Model T Ford, and whose experiences of the early days of air travel were a source of delight, this failure is strange indeed. It is true that the shadow cast by the assembly line had its dark side. The birth pains of the motor industry included poverty, unemployment, and labour exploitation. It may be that Niebuhr's negative attitude toward technology results from his grappling with these problems.

Perhaps his failure to appreciate nature stems from his polemic against 'soft-utopianism' in all its varieties, including a 'scientism' which dressed itself in the guise of a 'saviour' of contemporary society, and used the prestige of science to sanctify partial perspectives. These strictures granted, it is difficult

to understand how a contemporary of Alfred North Whitehead failed to appreciate the latters' contribution as a philosopher of science. For as Victor Lowe, an interpreter of Whitehead, has said: "The mathematician who, with Bertrand Russell, wrote Principia Mathematica, created in the late 1920's a new world view which, like the world itself, was too-big and many sided to be grasped at once." (181)

It is to Niebuhr's credit that his earliest book Does Civilization Need Religion? (1927) contains appreciative references to Whitehead's work. A footnote in that book says: "Professor Alfred Whitehead, in his Science and the Modern World and Religion in the Making indicates the inevitable anti-mechanistic trend of philosophical thought as it achieves mastery of the varied fields of modern science." (182) In his earliest book, Niebuhr draws the conclusion from his reading of Whitehead that "no total view of reality can ever be permanently mechanistic, for new types of reality do emerge and science is able to explain only the process and not the cause of their emergence." (183) It is our view that while Niebuhr does not speak of God in such terms as First Cause or Prime Mover, his understanding of God as the ultimate symbol of mystery and meaning, for which he finds warrant in the biblical tradition's understanding of radical monotheism, is his attempt to build a bridge between the biblical understanding of God and the metaphyscial thought of Whitehead.

It appears, however, that Niebuhr failed to grasp the implications of the dynamic view of the world which Whitehead's thought helped to create. As Victor Lowe says:

> "(In his) Science and the Modern World (1925) Whitehead showed why it was important for all of us that the criticism and replacement of the Newtonian concepts should be carried beyond the immediate concerns of physical science. Newton's success had established the reign of what Whitehead called 'scientific materialism' - the mechanistic view of nature which resulted from the work of the great seventeenth-century scientists. Dualism was its immediate result: the material world fitted this scheme of ideas, values were outside it. But as the application of the scheme increased, scientific materialism became a dominant force affecting morals, politics, poetry, the entire civilization of the occident. ... Idealistic philosophers did not dethrone it; like orthodox theologians, they assumed that this was the final scientific truth about nature, and then strove to mitigate it by arguing that nature

> presupposed something beyond nature. ... In the twentieth century, however, scientific materialism broke up from the inside: 'What is the sense of talking about a mechanical explanation when you do not know what you mean by mechanics?' wrote Whitehead. 'The only way of mitigating mechanism is by the discovery that it is not mechanism.' ... Could not the dualism be overcome at last by some new conception of the nature of things, which would express the aesthetic and purposive character of immediate experience at the same time that it provided a more adequate frame of reference, basically neither mechanistic nor materialistic, for natural science?" (184)

By the time Niebuhr wrote his Gifford Lectures his appreciation of Whitehead is severely qualified, and references to him appear in the chapter "The Optimism of Idealism" which describe Whitehead as "a striking example" of "idealistic optimism". One can only conclude from this that Niebuhr identified Whitehead with the 'soft-utopianism' which he sought to contest, and that he failed to appreciate that a dynamic view of the world does not necessarily carry this implication as we showed in relation to our discussion of Teilhard's view of evil in Chapter Three.

In the final analysis the reason for Niebuhr's failure to embrace a dynamic view of nature, and his reduction of nature to the amphi-theatre in which the drama of God's encounters with man in human history is played out, must remain a mystery which cannot be explained. It may be that Niebuhr's thorough-going pragmatism, and his concern for the moral issues of his time, enabled him to live with the uneasy dualism which is the consequence of his distinction between nature and human history and, as his earliest book suggests, to "accept at least a qualified dualism" because "it is morally more potent than traditional monism."

In a paradoxical way Niebuhr's determination to take "the various sciences seriously" fails to reap the promise implicit in that determination; namely, a theology which embraces nature in its scope. It leads him instead to distinguish nature from history "however much history may have a natural base", and does not recognize that nature itself has a history.

To move beyond Niebuhr towards a theology which embraces nature it will be necessary to marry what has become divorced in his method. In theological terms this means that we must bring

together the doctrines of Creation and Redemption and interpret them in a manner which includes both natural and human history seen in dynamic perspective.

In the matter of how we understand 'a theology of nature', Ian Barbour's description may provide a starting point: it is "an attempt to view nature in a theological perspective derived from religious experience and historical events." Barbour suggests that the work of process philosophers Whitehead and Teilhard de Chardin can contribute to such a theology. "I submit that the idea of a God of persuasion is consistent not only with the contemporary understanding of nature but also with the God of love known in religious experience and in the worshipping community." (185) Such a view would certainly mitigate the attenuated view of providence which is the consequence of Niebuhr's notion of a "quasi-autonomous" nature, and, by implication the "quasi-autonomous" character of history as 'drama'.

We cannot here enter into the consequences of a theology of nature of the sort Barbour proposes. No doubt the questions for theology raised by such an attempt are large and important ones, not the least of which being whether such an attempt does not involve us in a new kind of monism which identifies God with the world and which obscures the tension between transcendence and immanence which Niebuhr sought strenuously to hold.

We have said that to move towards a theology of nature it will be necessary to bring together the doctrines of Creation and Redemption, and to re-interpret these in dynamic terms. We believe that the Resurrection is that symbol in Christian theology which will enable us to do this. It may well be that the difficulties we discerned in Niebuhr's handling of the Resurrection can be attributed to his distinction between nature and history. He sees the Resurrection as that symbol in Christian theology which enables faith to hope "for an eternity which transfigures, but does not annul the temporal process." Since by history Niebuhr normally means human history we must understand the hope of a transfigured but not annulled "temporal process" expressed in the Resurrection symbol to apply only to human history. But this is to atrophy the Resurrection as it is understood in the New Testament where it has strong cosmic significance.

The significance for the whole created order which the Resurrection signified for Paul - "that the universe, all in heaven and on earth, might be brought into a unity in Christ" (Eph. 1:10), is attributable to the Hebraic totality view of human nature according to John Cumpsty. He writes:

> "Paul as a Jew, ... as M.E. Dahl has shown, held a totality view of human nature in spite of the dualist language he uses to his predominantly Gentile readers. If then Jesus lived after death, as for Paul he did, then Paul must have believed the tomb empty; sown a natural body and raised a spiritual body, but nevertheless raised. ... (It) is the only view consistent with a unitive concept of man; man formed of the dust of the ground and caused to live by the breath of God. Now if you believe that man is dust of the ground, matter caused to live and re-live though transformed, then you are led to recognize the possibility of cosmic redemption; new heavens and new earth yes, but in the sense of transformed not made afresh; all things summed up and given eternal significance. With cosmic redemption the radical discontinuity between this world and the next disappears. ... To retain a unitive view of man and to press on to its further possibility in terms of cosmic redemption (was Paul's intention)". (186)

As Cumpsty goes on to say, redemption has become too commonly identified with the survival of individuals and we too readily forget that most of the New Testament world believed in such survival, including some Jews, and to them Resurrection simply interpreted as a sign of survival would hardly have been 'good news'. It is as the removal of the last question mark set against the absolute Lordship of Yahweh - the question mark of death and decay - that the Resurrection must be understood, and therefore John can say in the same breath "in Him is life and without Him was not anything made that was made". The dichotomy between salvation and creation is overcome because it is now seen that the Ruler of history and nature can now reach into this flux of change and decay and preserve to Himself eternally that which He values. The Creation therefore in the Resurrection has a new status; it is eternally significant.

With this understanding of the Resurrection we can understand James Stewart's word: "In this cosmic event ... God was doing something comparable only with what He had done at the first creation. ... Resurrection meant that the world had died in the night and had been reborn." (187)

There are problems relating to any attempt to give credance to Resurrection today, but it is not apparent that such a project is impossible. It is not inconceivable that the modern view of nature, while it differs from the Hebraic, can enable us to find a way of interpreting the Resurrection which does justice to its New Testament significance as the 'sign' of cosmic redemption, and correlates with a dynamic view of nature expressed in the process thought of Whitehead in such phrases as: "the things which are temporal arise by their participation in the things which are eternal", and the view that the fundamental characteristic of nature is "passage" or "creative advance". (188)

If the Resurrection enabled the New Testament writers to assert the Lordship of Christ over matter, a re-interpretation of the Resurrection today may help us to assert the Lordship of Christ over an evolving, but not inevitably progressing process. The problems posed by such a project are no doubt tremendous and beyond our scope here. We nevertheless wish to indicate that if Creation and Redemption are to be brought together, and if theology is to find a way of viewing nature more adequately than Niebuhr's does, it must look to the Resurrection as that symbol in Christian faith which may enable us to do this.

(ii) Man's Essence As 'Dignity'

It is difficult to know whether Niebuhr's definition of man in terms of "radical freedom" is a cause or a consequence of his distinction between nature and history. What is certain is that for Niebuhr "freedom distinguishes man from the realm of nature", as one of his interpreters puts it. (189) Niebuhr makes this clear when he writes: man's "essence is free self-determination". (190) Ultimately Niebuhr would have to disagree with Sartre's dictum Opto ergo sum - "man is nothing else but what he makes himself". But it is only in the ultimate sense that the "mystery of man's freedom" is derived from God, that Niebuhr's notion of man's "unique and radical freedom" differs from Sartre's. As we have seen, the "mystery of creation" according to Niebuhr represents in some ultimate sense the mystery of freedom so that the created order is free ("quasi-autonomous") and man is also free vis a vis the Creator. Both the natural world and man have a 'provisional

freedom' from God while being bound to Him in some ultimate sense as Creator. Thus for all Niebuhr's statement that man is radically free, he comes nowhere near Sartre's position that man creates his own good and his own bad. Man, for Niebuhr, is free to obey or disobey.

According to Ronald Stone the roots of Niebuhr's doctrine of freedom can be traced to Heidegger and Kierkegaard. "Of particular importance to Niebuhr was Heidegger's view of man as the creature which reaches beyond itself, beyond its environment, beyond its time, and beyond its reason. ... Niebuhr's debt to Kierkegaard, particularly to Begriff der Angst, is obvious in The Nature and Destiny of Man. The anxiety which Kierkegaard called 'the dizziness of freedom' contains the possibility of choosing false gods or the true God. Like Kierkegaard, Niebuhr argues that no explanation but the affirmation that sin posits itself is sufficient to account for man's inevitable free choice of false centres of his existence." (191)

The contemporary crisis may also help to explain the roots of Niebuhr's doctrine of freedom. For it enabled him to vindicate divine sovereigny and to locate evil in human history in the corruption of man's freedom. If man's freedom is derived from God, the corruption of that freedom - man's sin - cannot be attributed to God. On the contrary superbia, the quintessence of sin, is man's abandoment of God as his "true end" and the making of himself a "kind of end". Believing that the contemporary crisis was of the same order as that which prompted Augustine's The City of God, Niebuhr's theodicy is Augustinian and his theology a theologia crucis which interprets the Incarnation in soteriological terms. He shares with Augustine the thought expressed in the ancient Easter liturgy: "O Felix culpa quae talem ac tantum meriut habere redemptorem", which John Hick translates as "O fortunate crime (or, O happy fault), which merited (to have) such and so great a redeemer." (192)

Despite his acknowledged indebtedness to Luther, Niebuhr's estimate of man as radically free does not reflect well his Lutheran heritage. The classic debate between Luther and Erasmus concerning man's freedom and his dignity serves to illustrate this. For although Niebuhr saw his role in the debate between faith and reason - the essence of the Luther-Erasmus conflict -

to be a defence of the faith against charges of incredulity and an attack on naive assumptions about reason, in the matter of his estimate of man he fails to reflect Luther's emphasis on man's dignity as a child of God. Heinrich Bornkamm describes the issue between Erasmus and Luther on the matter of freedom in the following way:

> "(Erasmus attacked) Luther at that point where Catholic and humanistic lines of thought met: namely, in the problem of free will. In his work De libero arbitrio (1524) the dogmatic solution of the problem was of no concern to him. ... It was not the question as such that interested him, but rather the moral consequences of the denial of free will. ... With his reply De servo arbitrio (1525) ... Luther ... was not only concerned with the moral consequences, but the question itself was of vital importance to him: the question of human freedom, seen from the perspective of the reality of God. Only this kind of freedom was his concern, not the philosophical question of determinism, the possibility of making a free choice in matters of every day life. ..." (193)

The significance we draw from this discussion is that Erasmus, the humanist, with his relatively optimistic view of the human situation believes that man's dignity requires that he have such freedom as to enable him to obey or disobey the commands of God. For Luther, man's dignity does not lie in any immediate sense in his freedom; he is either in bondage to sin or bondage to Christ. The dignity of man lies in God's purpose for him. So great is this purpose that by contrast man's present position might be likened to a drowning man in the midst of the sea who needs to be rescued not dignified with the belief that he can swim.

We conclude that there were ways open to Niebuhr to interpret human dignity other than as "radically free" and as "sinner" which led to the theologia crucis and the divide between nature and history. The consequences of Niebuhr's estimate of man should not, however, minimize his achievement if we remember that it was in an age when "scientific materialism" still predominated, and in a world shaken by crisis, that he sought to interpret man's nature in terms of freedom and sin.

If we describe man's essence as 'dignity' rather than 'freedom' the consequences of Niebuhr's estimate can be overcome and we can reflect more accurately than he was able to the richer estimate

of man contained in the biblical-Christian tradition. In this regard, Herbert Richardson has given to the word 'dignity' a meaning which may prove helpful for our understanding of man.

Richardson argues that we do not have a term which describes that elusive and yet fundamental property of a person which the Hebrew word kabod ('glory') denotes, and that the closest we can come to it is in the word 'dignity'. The following passage indicates the tenor of Richardson's argument:

> "Let us attempt to understand the meaning of 'dignity' by considering a Hebrew concept which is similar to it, the concept of kabod (usually translated as 'glory'). The kabod of God is not His nature ... Nor is God's kabod His very existence, for the word kabod cannot be used as a proper name. Rather, God's kabod is the weightiness, heaviness, degree, or dignity proper to being who He is. ...
>
> ... Dignity is the basis of authority. It is what gives weight to words, i.e., turns them into commands. ... Dignity is the basis of tragedy. It is what gives life importance and redeems it from triviality. ... Dignity is the basis of meaning. ... Even though life may have meaning, it may not have dignity.
>
> ... Dignity is a formal notion, and its material content can vary from case to case. A learned judge has kabod; so does a monarch. A man receives kabod from a good wife, and children may bring honour and glory to their parents." (194)

While it would take us beyond the scope of this essay to pursue Richardson's line of argument, it is illuminating to note its context. He argues that the theme of the glory of God is an emphasis in American theology which needs to be recovered today. It is intrinsic to that theological perspective which strives "to have God's purpose for creation actually be realized in the world - a desire to actualize eschatological holiness in space and time. Such a perspective implies that the fundamental theological question is cur creatio. " (195) As such it is a theologia gloriae rather than a theologia crucis: a theology which can however do full justice to the person and work of Christ.

Richardson's notion of 'dignity' may help us to move towards an estimate of man which does greater justice to the biblical-Christian tradition than Niebuhr's seems to do. Whereas Niebuhr sought to interpret the imago dei in terms of man's freedom and the corruption of that freedom of sin ('original sin'), we believe

that the imago dei can be understood in terms of 'dignity'. That is to say, God gives man kabod when He creates and redeems him. And man's chief end is to bring glory and honour to God. Such a view would affirm man's dignity without denying his capacity to sin. Man is free to obey or disobey, to bring glory to God or not to do so. Such an estimate of man would do justice to that vision of the dignity of man which Luther expressed.

The notion of kabod enables us to speak of God as ascribing to man an essential "weightiness" and "dignity" in creation, and to speak of man's individual and collective destiny as bringing glory and honour to God. It can do so without denying what is signified in the 'original sin' symbol; namely that man fails to do this and makes of himself a "kind of end" (Niebuhr). The imago dei signifies man's essence as dignity without denying his sin. The fact that God in Christ redeems man is further expression of the essential dignity which God ascribes to man.

It is possible to speak of the "weightiness" and "dignity" which God as Creator gives to the whole realm of nature and man's place in it. This is what a theologia gloriae seeks to do. But it is possible to do this without losing what is expressed in a theologia crucis; namely that God in Christ is Redeemer. The difficulty we have with Richardson is that, in his argument, he seems to suggest that we much choose a theology of glory or a theology of the Cross. If theology is to bring together Creation and Redemption, and to see these as embracing man and nature, it must look to the Resurrection - understood in its New Testament cosmic sense. For it is surely in the Resurrection that Creation is given an eternal significance which Redemption makes it possible to realize - "to have God's purpose for creation realized in the world" (Richardson). A theology of Resurrection will help us to affirm the 'dignity' (kabod or glory) of the created order, without denying the reality of sin and the need for redemption.

We summarize our discussion and its implications by asking whether Niebuhr's estimate of man's essence as "free self-determination" does justice to the imago dei symbol - ("It's freedom is a radical one. ... In the words of Pascal, the 'dignity of man and his misery' have the same source".) Surely the imago dei symbol expresses man's essence as the dignity which God gives him

both in creation and redemption: a dignity which embraces not only his freedom but his destiny also. Dignity not only presupposes freedom, it also describes that destiny which man's freedom enables him to choose.

The significance for social ethics of a description of man's essence in terms of dignity is that it provides us with a 'model of man' which embraces destiny. As such it gives to man's contemporary grappling a purpose which freedom itself does not give.

To speak of man's essence as dignity is to affirm that history has a destiny which man can realize, without denying the morally ambiguous character of history which Niebuhr asserted. For the conclusion which Niebuhr draws from the morally ambiguous character of history is that we achieve "a tolerable life in a kind of confusion of purposes, which is better than the organization of the whole resources of a community for the acheivement of false ends." This, writes Reubem Alves, "is to come to the bitter conclusion that there is no hope for history", for there is (in Niebuhr) a "profound pessimism" which does not recognize "the possibility of organizing the whole resources of a community for the achievement of true ends." "Social creativity is dismissed as either a utopian dream or an idealogical demon, with its ultimate roots in man's selfishness and self-deception." (196)

While we would want to emphasize the 'social creativity' of Niebuhr's stress on individual and collective self-interest at a time when notions of the 'inevitability of progress' were rife, there is substance in Alves' charge. We would, however, suggest that the reason for Niebuhr's pessimism is to be found in his stress on radical freedom, rather than in his stress on sin. For men do sin, and this is Niebuhr's outstanding contribution that he pointed to the dimensions of that sin for collective life. But to say that man is created free is not the same as saying man is created with dignity and a destiny which embraces freedom. To define man's essence as dignity, in the manner we have outlined, would enable us to identify the true ends which the whole resources of a community may achieve, without denying man's capacity for creating false ends, and without affirming the 'absurdity' of science and technology or the 'absurdity'of power as Alves seems to do. (197)

CONCLUSION

While there are aspects of Niebuhr's theology which neither do justice to the tradition, nor 'resonate' with contemporary experience - and therefore constitute a failure to fulfill the promise of his theological method - we have sought to show that this failure is one of 'estimate' rather than method. It is thus a failure in the degree to which he was able to rely on his own method. In a paradoxical way his 'failures of estimate' vindicate his method. For the 'circularity' intrinsic to his method prevents partial perspectives from becoming absolutized and provides the means of testing and refining them that they may be corrected; that we may move towards a fuller adequation between tradition and experience.

If there is one lesson we do well to learn from Reinhold Niebuhr it is that we will not validate Christian faith, or derive criteria for social choice, except in the interplay between tradition and experience. A theology which embraces nature within its scope, and which holds before man a vision of his dignity, may be better able to validate itself and to provide criteria for social choice in the face of the problems and possibilities of our time.

In the theological method of Reinhold Niebuhr we learn that authority in doctrine and ethics lies in the adequation between the truth revealed in the tradition, and the realities of contemporary experience. Men may be grasped by the adequation between them, and directed in their 'care of the world' by the God who reveals Himself in both tradition and experience. Authority lies in that adequation - "it is what gives weight to words, that is, turns them into commands". It is the authority men felt in the presence of Jesus:

> "The people were astounded at his teaching, for, unlike the doctors of law, he taught with a note of authority." (Mark 1:22)

NOTES ON CHAPTER ONE

1. Ian Barbour, Science and Secularity. New York: Harper & Row, 1970. p.4.
2. F. Carney, "Deciding in the Situation: What Is Required?" in Norm and Context in Christian Ethics, edited by G. Outka and P. Ramsey, London: SCM Press, 1969. p.36.
3. J. Fletcher, "What's in a Rule: A Situationist's View", in Norm and Context in Christian Ethics, edited by Outka and Ramsey, p.328.
4. J. Fletcher, Situation Ethics, London: SCM Press, 1966, p.43.
5. J.A.T. Robinson, Honest To God, London: SCM Press, 1963, p.115.
6. P. Ramsey, Deeds and Rules in Christian Ethics Scottish Journal of Theology Occasional Papers No. 11, Edinburgh: Oliver& Boyd, 1965, p.17.
7. D. Evans, "Love, Situation and Rules" in Norm and Context, eds. Outka and Ramsey, pp.368f.
8. N.H.G. Robinson, The Groundwork of Christian Ethics, London: Collins, 1971 pp. 249, 253.
9. J. Fletcher in Norm and Context, eds. Outka and Ramsey, p.339.
10. F. Carney, in Norm and Context, eds. Outka and Ramsey, p.4.
11. ap. F. Carney, Norm and Context, p.4 (The writer whom Carney quotes is Paul Ramsey).
12. P. Ramsey, "Love and Law" in Reinhold Niebuhr: His Religious, Social,& Political Thought, The Library of Living Theology, Vol.2, edited by C. Kegley and R.W. Bretall, New York: The Macmillan Company, Paperback, 1961, p.80.
13. ibid., p.81
14. ap., Norm and Context., eds. Outka and Ramsey, p.328.
15. P. Ramsey in Reinhold Niebuhr., eds. Kegley and Bretall, p.82.
16. N.H.G. Robinson, The Groundwork of Christian Ethics, p.211.
17. C. Curran, "Absolute Norms in Moral Theology" in Norm and Context., eds., Outka and Ramsey, p.166.
18. idem.
19. B. Häring, "Dynamism and Continuity in a Personalistic Approach to Natural Law" in Norm and Context., eds., Outka and Ramsey, pp. 204 ff.
20. Barbour, Science and Secularity, p.8.
21. P. Lehmann, Ethics in a Christian Context, London: SCM Press, 1963, p.17.
22. J. Fletcher in Norm and Context., eds. Outka and Ramsey, pp. 340 ff.
23. ap. N.H.G. Robinson, p.199.
24. ap. N.H.G. Robinson, p.199
25. idem
26. ibid., p.201.

NOTES ON CHAPTER ONE

27. P. Ramsey, Deed and Rules in Christian Ethics, p.57.
28. J. Moltmann, Hope and Planning, London SCM Press, 1971, pp. 101 - 129.
29. J. Moltmann, Theology of Hope, London SCM Press, 1967.
30. J. Moltmann, Hope and Planning, pp. 103 - 105.
31. ibid., p.106.
32. idem
33. idem
34. ibid., p.108.
35. ibid., p.124.
36. idem
37. ibid., pp. 124 - 125.
38. ibid., p.129.
39. W. Nicholls, Systematic and Philosophical Theology, Pelican Guide to Modern Theology, 1969, p.339.
40. J. Moltmann, Theology of Hope, p.165.
41. ibid., p.177.
42. ibid., p.180.
43. idem
44. R. Alves, A Theology of Human Hope, Washington: Corpus Books, 1969, p.23.
45. R. Alves, Tomorrow's Child, London: SCM Press, 1972.
46. G.E. Wright, The Old Testament Against Its Environment, London: SCM Press, 1950, p.71.
47. ibid., p.72.
48. G. von Rad, The Message Of The Prophets, London: SCM Press, 1968, p.89.
49. H.H. Rowley, The Rediscovery Of The Old Testament, London: James Clarke, 1945, p.73.
50. G.E. Wright, The Old Testament Against., P.72.
51. K. Popper, The Poverty of Historicism, London: Rontledge and Kegan Paul, 1961repr. 1963.
52. ibid., p.vii.
53. ibid., pp. vii.ff.
54. ap. J. Macquarrie, Twentieth Century Religious Thought, London: SCM Press 1967, p.308.
55. ap. J. Macquarrie, p.308.
56. ap. J. Macquarrie, p.308.
57. idem

NOTES ON CHAPTER ONE

58. ibid., pp.308f.

59. K. Popper, The Poverty of Historicism, pp. 131 - 133.

60. ap. W. Nicholls, Systematic And Philosophical., p.343.

61. K. Popper, "Has History Any Meaning?" in The Philosophy of History In Our Time, edited by H. Meyerhoff, New York: Doubleday Anchor Books, 1959, pp. 310f.

62. J.S. Cumpsty, Religion In the Dynamics of Freedom : Inaugural Lecture, University of Cape Town, New Series No.5., 1970, p.4.

NOTES ON CHAPTER TWO

1. J. Bingham, Courage To Change, New York: Charles Scribner's Sons, 1961, ap., p.139.
2. R. Niebuhr, Man's Nature And His Communities, London: Geoffrey Bles, 1966, p.10f.
3. Kegley and Bretall, eds. Reinhold Niebuhr., p.4.
4. ibid., p.8.
5. ibid., p.9.
6. idem
7. ibid., p.10.
8. Knoles, G.H. The Responsibilities of Power 1900 - 1929, New York:Free Press Collier Ltd., 1967, pp.1 - 32.
9. ibid., p.8.
10. ap., ibid., p.9.
11. J. Bingham, p.49.
12. ibid., p.50.
13. Kegley and Bretall,(eds.), Reinhold Niebuhr., p.3.
14. J. Bingham, p.58.
15. ap., ibid., p.51.
16. Kegley and Bretall, (eds.), Reinhold Niebuhr., p.3.
17. ap., Bingham, p.62.
18. Kegley and Bretall, (eds.), Reinhold Niebuhr., pp.3f.
19. ap., Bingham, p.65.
20. ap., ibid., p.79.
21. ap., ibid., p.84.
22. idem
23. ibid., p.85.
24. ibid., p.88.
25. ap., ibid., p.87.
26. Kegley and Bretall, (eds.), Reinhold Niebuhr., p.4.
27. idem
28. ap., Bingham, p.139.
29. G. Knoles,, The Responsibilities., p.9.
30. Oxford Dictionary of the Christian Church, London: O.U.P., 1958, p.1168.
31. H.R. Mackintosh, Types of Modern Theology, London: Collins, Fontana, 1964, p.141.
32. A. Harnack, What is Christianity?, London: Williams & Norgate, 3rd rev. ed. 1904, p.65.

NOTES ON CHAPTER TWO

33. ibid., p.305.
34. T.F. Torrence, Karl Barth, 1910 - 1931, London: SCM Press, 1962, p.18.
35. A. Harnack, What is Christianity?, pp. 118 - 119.
36. ibid., p.119.
37. W. Beach & H. Richard Niebuhr (eds.), Christian Ethics, New York: Ronald Press Co., 1955, p.483.
38. ibid.,pp.445f.
39. ibid., p.448.
40. ap., ibid., p.461.
41. ap. ibid.,pp.467f.
42. ap. ibid., pp. 468 - 473.
43. Kegley and Bretall, (eds.), Reinhold Niebuhr., p.7.
44. Bingham, p.102.
45. R. Niebuhr, Leaves from the Notebooks of a Tamed Cynic, New York: Living Age Books, Meridian Books, 1957, p.45.
46. Kegley and Bretall, (eds.), Reinhold Niebuhr., p.5.
47. ap. Bingham, p.129.
48. Kegley and Bretall, (eds.) Reinhold Niebuhr., p.5.
49. Bingham, pp. 129 - 130.
50. Kegley and Bretall,(eds.), Reinhold Niebuhr., p.5.
51. ap. Bingham, p.30.
52. ap. Bingham, p.30.
53. ap. R. Morris and W. Greenleaf, United States of America: The History of a Nation, Volume II, Chicago: Rand McNally & Co., 1969, p.551.
54. ibid., p.552.
55. D.B. Robertson, Ed., Love and Justice, New York: Meridian Books, 1967, - Selections from the Shorter Writings of Reinhold Niebuhr, pp. 98 - 102.
56. ibid., pp. 103 - 109.
57. Bingham, pp.137f.
58. D.B. Robertson, Ed., Love and Justice, p.107.
59. ap., Bingham, p.137.
60. Morris & Greenleaf, p.470.
61. ibid., p.476.
62. ap., ibid., p.477.
63. ibid., pp. 441 - 442.
64. Bingham, p.139.

NOTES ON CHAPTER TWO

65. Kegley and Bretall, (eds.) Reinhold Niebuhr., p.140.
66. ibid.,pp.8f.
67. ap., Morris and Greenleaf, p.697.
68. Figures supplied by Morris & Greenleaf.
69. Morris & Greenleaf, p.698.
70. ibid., p.743.
71. Bingham, p.154.
72. Morris & Greenleaf, p.752.
72A. ibid., pp. 755f.
73. ap. Bingham, p.155.
74. ap. Bingham, p.156.
75. ap. Bingham, p.156.
76. Morris & Greenleaf, p.744.
77. ibid., p.781.
78. Kegley & Bretall (eds.), Reinhold Niebuhr., p.138.
79. ap. Bingham, p.169.
80. ibid., pp. 169ff.
81. D.B. Robertson, Ed., Love and Justice, p.275.
82. R. Niebuhr, REINHOLD NIEBUHR ON Faith and Politics, (Eds) AR DAVIS & R.C.GOOD, New York: CHAS. SCRIBNERS SONS George Braziller, 1968, p.141.
83. R. Niebuhr, Moral Man and Immoral Society, London: SCM Press, 1963, p.220.
84. ibid., p.251.
85. ap. Bingham, p.158.
86. R. Niebuhr, Man's Nature and His., p.14.
87. Kegley & Bretall, (eds.), Reinhold Niebuhr., p.73.
88. ibid., p.74.
89. See Bingham, pp. 158 - 159: Niebuhr's biographer has indicated that at the height of his Marxism Niebuhr "always had reservations about it." She summarizes his points of agreement and points of disagreement in such a way as to elucidate these "reservations."
90. Kegley & Bretall, (eds.), Reinhold Niebuhr., p.72.
91. ibid., p.46.
92. R. Niebuhr, Man's Nature and His., p.15.
93. Kegley & Bretall, (eds.), Reinhold Niebuhr., p.9.
94. Bingham, p.339.

NOTES ON CHAPTER TWO

95. H.R. Davis & R.C. Good, (eds.), Reinhold Niebuhr on Politics, New York: Charles Scribner's Sons, 1960, pp. 3 - 4.

96. ibid., p.66.

97. F. Copleston, A History of Philosophy: Volume II, London: Burns & Oates Ltd., 1966, p.84.

98. R. Niebuhr, The Nature and Destiny of Man: Volume I, London: Nisbet & Co., Ltd., 1941, ap., p.256f.

99. ibid., p.258.

100. F. Copleston, A History., p.85.

101. R. Niebuhr, Christian Realism and Political Problems, New York: Charles Scribner's Sons, 1953, p.134.

102. ibid., pp. 138 - 145.

103. ibid., pp. 145 - 146.

104. Kegley & Bretall, (eds.), Reinhold Niebuhr., p.181.

105. Bingham, p.339.

106. Kegley & Bretall, (eds.), Reinhold Niebuhr., p.183.

107. D.E. Roberts, Existentialism and Religious Belief, New York: O.U.P., Galaxy, 1959, p.4. Niebuhr's comment on Roberts' book is, this is "by far the best book he ever wrote".

108. ibid.,pp.6f.

109. R. Niebuhr, Christian Realism.,pp.178f.

110. R. Niebuhr, The Nature and Destiny., Volume I, p.258.

111. R. Niebuhr, Christian Realism., p.183.

112. ap., R. Niebuhr, The Nature and Destiny., Volume I,pp.182f (We have shortened the quotation from Kierkegaard).

113. R. Niebuhr, Christian Realism.,pp.187f.

114. ibid.,pp.192f.

115. ap., Bingham, p.337.

116. T.F. Torrence, Karl Barth (1910 - 1931), p.37.

117. H. Mackintosh, p.209.

118. ibid., p.252.

119. J. Moltmann, Hope and Planning, p.11.

120. ibid., pp.12f.

121. D.B. Robertson, Ed., Essays in Applied Christianity, New York: Meridian, 1959, p.144.

122. ibid., p.145.

123. ibid., pp. 141f.

124. ibid., p.145.

NOTES ON CHAPTER TWO

125. idem
126. ibid., p.169.
127. ibid., p.170.
128. R. Niebuhr, Christian Realism., p.193.
129. D.B. Robertson, Essays., p.176.
130. ibid., p.186.
131. ibid., pp.190 - 193.
132. ap. Bingham, p.344.

NOTES ON CHAPTER THREE

1. R. Niebuhr, Christian Realism., pp. 175 - 203.
2. J.C. Bennett, "The Contribution of Reinhold Niebuhr", Union Seminary Quarterly Review, XXIV No. 1, Fall 1968, 16.
3. A. Vidler, The Church in an Age of Revolution, Penguin, 1961, ap., pp. 212f.
4. Kegley & Bretall, (eds.), Reinhold Niebuhr., p.4.
5. ibid., pp. 299f.
6. R. Niebuhr, Does Civilization Need Religion?, New York: Macmillan Company, 1941, p.190.
7. ibid., pp. 190 - 191.
8. ibid., p.194.
9. ibid., pp. 195, 199.
10. ap. ibid., p.198.
11. ibid., p.213.
12. idem
13. R. Niebuhr, Christian Realism., pp. 119 - 146.
14. ibid., p.119.
15. R. Stone, Reinhold Niebuhr : Prophet to Politicians, New York: Abingdon Press, 1972, p.11.
16. R. Niebuhr, Man's Nature and His., p.28.
17. Kegley & Bretall, (eds.), The Theology of Emil Brunner: Volume III, New York: The Macmillan Co. 1962, p.99.
18. Kegley & Bretall, (eds.),The Theology of Paul Tillich: Volume I, New York: The Macmillan Co., 1961, p.216.
19. Kegley & Bretall, (eds.), Reinhold Niebuhr., pp. 431 - 432.
20. ibid., pp. 438 - 439.
21. Kegley & Bretall, (eds.), Emil Brunner., p.34.
22. ibid., pp. 35 - 38.
23. ibid., p.327.
24. Bingham, p.355.
25. R. Niebuhr, Christian Realism., p.1.
26. Bingham, ap., p.354.
27. R. Niebuhr, Christian Realism., p.177.
28. idem
29. ibid., pp. 178 - 179.
30. ibid., p.179.
31. idem

NOTES ON CHAPTER THREE

32. ibid., p.181.
33. idem
34. ibid., p.182.
35. idem
36. ibid., p.183.
37. ibid., pp. 183 - 185.
38. ibid., p.185.
39. ibid., p.186.
40. See our dicussion of the "two traditions" Niebuhr identified in Chapter One. Cf. Christian Realism, pp.187f.
41. R. Niebuhr, Christian Realism., p.196.
42. ibid., pp. 196f.
43. ibid., p.197.
44. ibid., p.198.
45. idem
46. idem
47. ibid., p.197.
48. ibid., p.198.
49. ibid., p.199.
50. ibid., pp. 199 - 200.
51. ibid., pp. 200 - 201.
52. ibid., p.201.
53. ibid., pp. 201 - 202.
54. ibid., p.203.
55. ibid., p.203.
56. A. MacIntyre, Ed., Metaphysical Beliefs, London: SCM Press, 1957, p.174.
57. R. Niebuhr, Christian Realism., p.198.
58. ibid., p.200.
59. idem
60. ibid., p.202.
61. Kegley & Bretall, (eds.), Reinhold Niebuhr., p.9.
62. ibid., p.16.
63. ibid., pp. 16 - 17.
64. ibid., p.18.
65. idem
66. ibid., p.19.

NOTES ON CHAPTER THREE

67. ibid., p.20.

68. ibid., p.19.

69. R. Niebuhr, Christian Realism., p.201.

70. ibid., p.202.

71. ibid., p.4.

72. ibid., p.6.

73. L. Gilkey, Naming the Whirlwind: The Renewal of God-Language, New York: The Bobbs-MerríII Company, 1969, pp.91f.

74. D. Bonhoeffer, Letters and Papers from Prison, London: Collins, Fontana Books, 1959, p.93.

75. ibid., p.107.

76. R. Niebuhr, Does Civilization., p.31.

77. R. Niebuhr, The Nature and Destiny., Volume I, pp. 120 - 121.

78. R. Niebuhr, Christianity & Power Politics, New York: Scribner's Sons, 1952, p.201.

79. idem

80. R. Niebuhr, Christian Realism., p.201.

81. W. Nicholl, Systematic & Philosophical Theology, pp. 334f.

82. P. Hefner, The Promise of Teilhard, New York: J.B. Lippincott Co., 1970, p.18.

83. T. de Chardin, The Phenomenon of Man, London: Collins, 1959, p.219.

84. B. Towers, Teilhard de Chardin, London: The Carey Kingsgate Press Ltd., 1966, p.31.

85. P. Hefner, p.48.

86. M. Jarrett-Kerr, The Secular Promise, London: SCM Press, 1964, p.81.

87. P. Hefner, p.78.

88. ibid., ap., p.78.

89. M. Jarrett-Kerr, p.193.

90. ap. P. Hefner, p.81.

91. ibid., pp. 81 - 82.

92. ibid., p.83.

93. T. de Chardin, The Phenomenon of Man, p.290.

NOTES ON CHAPTER FOUR

1. L. Gilkey, Naming the Whirlwind., p.84.
2. R. Alves, A Theology of Human Hope, p.120.
3. D. Jenkins, Beyond Religion, London: SCM Press, 1962, p.66.
4. R. Niebuhr, Man's Nature and His., pp. 9 - 10.
5. D. Peerman, Ed., Frontline Theology, London: SCM Press, 1967, p.149.
6. Kegley & Bretall (eds.), Reinhold Niebuhr., p.5.
7. R. Niebuhr, Man's Nature and His., p.14.
8. ibid., p.16.
9. ibid., pp. 16 - 17.
10. H.C. Rümke, The Psychology of Unbelief, Rocksliff Press, 1952, p.16.
11. ibid., p.XV.
12. W. Dray, Philosophy of History, Englewood Cliffs: Prentice-Hall Inc., 1964, pp.61ff.
13. ibid., p.62.
14. V. Harvey, The Historian and the Believer, London: SCM Press, 1967, pp. 14 - 15. Cf. Troeltsch's article "Historiography" in James Hastings' (ed.) Encyclopedia of Religion and Ethics, New York: Charles Scribner's Sons, 1914, Volume VI, pp. 716 - 723.
15. ibid., p.15.
16. ibid., pp. 15 - 16.
17. Richard R. Niebuhr, The Resurrection and Historical Reason, New York: Charles Scribner's Sons, 1957.
18. W. Nicholls, Systematic and Philosophical Theology, p.47.
19. J. Rex, Key Problems of Sociological Theory, London: Routledge & Kegan Paul, 1961.
20. W. Nicholls, pp. 47 - 48.
21. V. Harvey, pp. 17 - 18.
22. ibid., p.127.
23. ibid., p.104.
24. idem
25. ibid., p.143.
26. ibid., p.134.
27. idem
28. ibid., p.147.
29. ibid., pp. 147 - 148.
30. ibid., p.148.
31. ibid., p.149.
32. ibid., pp. 153 - 159.

NOTES ON CHAPTER FOUR

33. ibid., pp. 135 - 136.
34. A full list of books and articles is given in Kegley & Bretall, (eds.), Reinhold Niebuhr. This list, of course, will have to be updated, since Niebuhr continued to write profusely until his death in 1971.
35. Davis & Good, (eds.), Reinhold Niebuhr on Politics, pp. 3 - 4.
36. W. Dray, pp. 98 - 112.
37. ibid., p.98.
38. R. Niebuhr, Faith and History, London: Nisbet & Co. Ltd., 1949, pp. 15 - 16. (Please note: for convenience page references to this work are given in the text.)
39. H. Cox, On Not Leaving It to the Snake, London: SCM Press, 1968, pp. 34 - 35. (The author, in fact, goes on to analyze these "embellishments").
40. R. Niebuhr, The Irony of American History, London: Nisbet & Co. Ltd., 1952, p.15.
41. R. Niebuhr, Christianity and Power Politics, p.180.
42. Kegley & Bretall, (eds.), pp. 294 - 295.
43. R. Niebuhr, The Irony., p.133.
44. R. Niebuhr, The Nature and Destiny., Volume II, p.16.
45. W. Dray, p.102. (Note: references to Niebuhr's Faith and History in Dray are in the American edition of Niebuhr's work).
46. Kegley & Bretall, (eds.), Reinhold Niebuhr., p.294.
47. H. Cox, On Not Leaving It., p.36.
48. Kegley & Bretall, (eds.), Reinhold Niebuhr., p.295.
49. R. Niebuhr, The Nature and Destiny., Volume II, p.316.
50. W. Dray, p.109.
51. G.E. Wright, The Old Testament., p.72.
52. Bingham, p.268.
53. Kegley & Bretall, (eds.), Reinhold Niebuhr., p.439.
54. ibid., p.253.
55. ibid., p.254.
56. R. Niebuhr, The Nature and Destiny., Volume II, pp. 85 - 95.
57. R. Schaull, "Theology and the Transformation of Society", Theology Today, 25, April, 1968, 24.
58. ibid., 25.
59. Kegley & Bretall, (eds.), Reinhold Niebuhr., p.438.
60. R. Niebuhr, Christian Realism., p.198.
61. ibid., p.203.
62. R. Hepburn, Christianity and Paradox, London: Watts, 1958, p.99.

NOTES ON CHAPTER FOUR

63. idem
64. ibid., p.100.
65. R. Niebuhr, Christian Realism., p.198.
66. ibid., pp. 198 - 199.
67. J.S. Cumpsty, Unpublished paper on "A Theological Interpretation of the Resurrection".
68. M.E. Dahl, The Resurrection of the Body, London: SCM Press, 1962, p.71.
69. Davis & Good (eds.), Reinhold Niebuhr on Politics, p.viii.
70. Kegley & Bretall, (eds.), Reinhold Niebuhr., pp. 292 - 293.
71. R. Niebuhr, Leaves., pp. 95ff.
72. R. Niebuhr, Discerning the Signs of the Times, London: SCM Press, 1946, p.86.
73. idem
74. D.B. Robertson, Ed., Love and Justice, pp. 292ff.
75. Kegley & Bretall, (eds.), Reinhold Niebuhr., pp.296ff.
76. ibid., p.267.
77. ibid., p.297.
78. R. Niebuhr, Reflections on the End of an Era, New York: Charles Scribner's Sons, 1934, p.ix.
79. R. Niebuhr, An Interpretation of Christian Ethics, London: SCM Press, 1936, p.22.
80. J.S. Bixler, R. Calhoun and H.R. Niebuhr, (eds.), The Nature of Religious Experience, New York: Harper & Bros., 1937, pp.117f.
81. R. Niebuhr, Beyond Tragedy, London: Nisbet & Co. Ltd., 1938, p.x.
82. Kegley & Bretall, (eds.), Reinhold Niebuhr., p.439.
83. R. Niebuhr, Man's Nature and His., pp. 15f.
84. ibid., p.16.
85. See R. Stone, Reinhold Niebuhr : Prophet., pp. 131f.
86. ibid., p.134.
87. ap. Stone, p.135.
88. R. Niebuhr, "The Truth in Myths" in J.S. Bixler, et al., The Nature of Religious Experience, p.117.
89. ibid., p.118.
90. J. Hutchinson, Faith, Reason and Existence, New York, O.U.P., 1956, pp.37f.
91. S. Langer, Philosophy in a New Key, Cambridge, Mass.: Harvard University Press, 1960, pp. 3, 21.

NOTES ON CHAPTER FOUR

92. R. Niebuhr, Reflections., p.194.
93. ibid., pp.122f.
94. R. Niebuhr, An Interpretation., p.22.
95. Kegley & Bretall, (eds.), Reinhold Niebuhr., p.438.
96. R. Niebuhr, "The Truth in Myths", pp.118f.
97. ibid., pp. 119 - 129.
98. R. Niebuhr, Beyond Tragedy, pp.21f and pp.290f.
99. I. Henderson, Myth in the New Testament, London: SCM Press, 1952, pp.52f.
100. R. Niebuhr, An Interpretation., p.93.
101. R. Niebuhr, "The Truth in Myths", p.129.
102. idem
103. ibid., p.130.
104. idem
105. R. Niebuhr, An Interpretation., p.32.
106. idem
107. ibid., pp. 35 - 37.
108. ibid., p.40.
109. idem
110. R. Niebuhr, Reflections., p.124.
111. idem
112. ibid., p.125.
113. ibid., p.127.
114. ibid., p.132.
115. R. Niebuhr, Christian Realism., p.34.
116. ibid., pp. 36, 40.
117. R. Niebuhr, "The Truth in Myths", p.131.
118. ibid., pp. 131 - 133.
119. ibid., pp. 133 - 135.
120. R. Niebuhr, The Nature and Destiny., Volume II, p.52 and p.299.
121. R. Niebuhr, Man's Nature and His., p.16.
122. Kegley & Bretall, (eds.), Reinhold Niebuhr., pp. 438 - 439.
123. ibid., p.439 (italics added).
124. R. Niebuhr, Christian Realism., p.198.
125. I. Henderson, p.50.
126. ibid., p.52.

NOTES ON CHAPTER FOUR

127. ibid., p.53.

128. R. Niebuhr, Beyond Tragedy, p.5.

129. R. Niebuhr, The Self in the Dramas of History, London: Faber & Faber Ltd., 1956, p.12.

130. ibid., pp.53 - 58.

131. ibid., p.64.

132. ibid., p.165.

133. ap., R. Stone, Reinhold Niebuhr: Prophet., p.40.

134. ap., R. Stone, ibid., p.61.

135. ibid., p.66.

136. R. Niebuhr, Beyond Tragedy, p.Xf.

137. Kegley & Bretall, (eds.), Reinhold Niebuhr., p.181.

138. R. Niebuhr, Reflections., pp.202f.

139. R. Niebuhr, The Irony., pp. IXf.

140. R. Niebuhr, Beyond Tragedy., pp.51f.

141. ibid., p.65.

142. ap., Bingham, p.334.

143. Bingham, p.297.

144. R. Niebuhr, The Irony., p.X.

145. idem

146. idem

147. ibid., p.144.

148. ibid., pp.133f.

149. ibid., p.35.

150. ibid., p.136.

151. See R. Stone, Reinhold Niebuhr, Prophet., p.143.

152. R. Niebuhr, The Irony.,pp.Xf.

153. R. Niebuhr, "The Social Myths in the 'Cold War'", Journal of International Affairs, 21, 1967, 40.

154. ibid., 41.

155. G. Winter, Ed., Social Ethics., London: SCM Press, 1968, p.143.

156. R. Niebuhr, "The Social Myths in the 'Cold War'", 41.

157. R. Niebuhr, The Irony., pp.77f.

158. R. Niebuhr, "The Social Myths in the 'Cold War'", 42.

159. ibid., 50.

160. ibid., 51.

NOTES ON CHAPTER FOUR

161. ibid., 46.
162. ibid., 47.
163. ibid., 51.
164. ibid., 52f.
165. ibid., 56.
166. R. Niebuhr, The Irony., p.130.
167. idem
168. R. Niebuhr, "The Social Myths in the 'Cold War'", 42 - 43.
169. R. Niebuhr, The Irony., p.131.
170. idem
171. R. Stone, Reinhold Niebuhr : Prophet., p.41.
172. R. Niebuhr, The Irony., p.144.
173. R. Niebuhr, Man's Nature and His., p.16.
174. ap., Bingham, p.316.
175. R. Niebuhr., The Irony., pp.141f.
176. Kegley and Bretall, (eds.), Reinhold Niebuhr., p.75.
177. idem
178. R. Stone, Reinhold Niebuhr : Prophet., p.142.
179. R. Niebuhr, The Self., pp.175f.
180. ibid., p.177.
181. ap., Bingham, p.401.
182. R. Niebuhr, "The Social Myths in the 'Cold War'", 41.
183. R. Niebuhr, Reflections., p.IX.
184. R. Niebuhr, The Self., p.174.
185. ap., Bingham, p.372.
186. ap., Bingham, p.391.
187. ap., Bingham, p.394.
188. idem
189. ibid., p.390.
190. Kegley & Bretall, (eds.), Reinhold Niebuhr., p.434.

NOTES ON CHAPTER FIVE

1. Kegley & Bretall, (eds.), Reinhold Niebuhr., p.xi.
2. R. Niebuhr, Faith and Politics, ed. R. Stone. NEW YORK: GEORGE BRAZILLER, 1968.
3. ibid., pp.103f.
4. ibid., p.viii.
5. I. Barbour, Issues in Science and Religion, London: SCM Press, 1968, pp.5f.
6. See. R. Niebuhr, Christian Realism., pp.196ff.
7. R. Niebuhr, Faith and Politics, p.7.
8. L. Gilkey, Religion and the Scientific Future, London: SCM Press, 1970, p.25.
9. R. Niebuhr, An Interpretation., p.37.
10. Kegley & Bretall, Reinhold Niebuhr., p.15.
11. R. Niebuhr, Faith and Politics, pp.viif.
12. ap., Bingham, p.342.
13. ap., Bingham, p.343.
14. ap., R. Stone, Reinhold Niebuhr : Prophet., p.132.
15. R. Niebuhr, Faith and Politics, p.3.
16. R. Niebuhr., Discerning the Signs., p.133.
17. ibid., p.134.
18. idem
19. R. Niebuhr ,Faith and Politics., pp.12f.
20. D.B. Robertson, ed., Essays., p.157.
21. R. Niebuhr, Christianity and Power Politics, pp.180f.
22. ibid., p.200.
23. ibid., p.183.
24. ibid., p.200.
25. D.B. Robertson, ed., Essays., p.149.
26. R. Niebuhr, Christian Realism., p.197.
27. ibid., p.199.
28. R. Niebuhr, Christianity and Power Politics, pp.177f.
29. ibid., p.178.
30. ibid.,p.130.
31. ibid., p.180.
32. idem
33. ibid., p.181.
34. R. Niebuhr, Christian Realism., p.203.

NOTES ON CHAPTER FIVE

35. R. Niebuhr, The Godly and the Ungodly, London: Faber & Bager Ltd., 1949, pp.125f.
36. R. Niebuhr, Faith and Politics, p.6.
37. R. Niebuhr, The Godly., p.126.
38. idem
39. R. Niebuhr, Christian Realism., p.199.
40. D.B. Robertson, ed., Essays., p.161.
41. R. Niebuhr, Christianity and Power Politics, pp. 186 - 188.
42. ibid., p.188.
43. Kegley & Bretall, (eds.), Reinhold Niebuhr., pp.80 - 123.
44. R. Niebuhr, Christian Realism., pp. 147 - 173.
45. Kegley & Bretall, (eds.), Reinhold Niebuhr., p.435.
46. R. Niebuhr, Man's Nature and His., p.12.
47. R. Niebuhr, "The Problem of a Protestant Social Ethic", Union Seminary Quarterly Review, XV (November 1959) 3.
48. R. Niebuhr, Man's Nature and His., p.12.
49. idem
50. ibid., p.13.
51. R. Niebuhr, "The Problem of a Protestant Social Ethic", 7.
52. D.B. Robertson, ed., Essays., p.150.
53. ap., ibid., p.19.
54. idem
55. ibid., p.151.
56. ibid., p.152.
57. ibid., p.154.
58. R. Niebuhr, "The Problem of a Protestant Social Ethic", 10f.
59. R. Niebuhr, Faith and Politics, p.19.
60. ibid., p.6.
61. R. Niebuhr, Christian Realism., pp.199f.
62. Kegley & Bretall, (eds.), Reinhold Niebuhr., p.382 (italics omitted).
63. R. Niebuhr, Beyond Tragedy, p.242.
64. Kegley & Bretall, (eds.), Reinhold Niebuhr., p.382.
65. R. Niebuhr, Christian Realism., p.200.
66. ap., Bingham, p.126.
67. R. Niebuhr, Christian Realism., p.200.
68. idem

NOTES ON CHAPTER FIVE

69. Bingham, p.393.

70. Niebuhr acknowledges his 'existentialism' and his 'neo-orthodoxy' in Christian Realism., pp.196f.

71. R. Niebuhr, The Godly., p.126.

72. R. Niebuhr, The Nature and Destiny., Volume I, p.131.

73. R. Niebuhr, The Godly., p.126.

74. R. Niebuhr, Faith and Politics., pp.79f.

75. ibid., p.80.

76. ibid., p.81.

77. idem

78. idem "

79. R. Niebuhr, The Godly., p.126.

80. ibid., pp.128f.

81. ibid., p.131.

82. R. Niebuhr, The Nature and Destiny., Volume I, pp.270f.

83. R. Niebuhr, Christianity and Power Politics, pp.180f.

84. ibid., p.199.

85. R. Niebuhr, The Children of Light and the Children of Darkness, New York: Scribner's Sons, 1944, p.xi.

86. Kegley & Bretall, (eds.), Reinhold Niebuhr., p.241.

87. Bingham, p.141.

88. R. Niebuhr, Faith and History, pp.136f.

89. J. Hick, Evil and the Love of God, London: Collins, Fontana, 1968, p.51.

90. ap., Hick, p.54.

91. Cf. R. Niebuhr, The Nature and Destiny., Volume I, pp.200f.

92. A discussion of acedia is given in Harvey Cox, On Not Leaving It to the Snake, pp. vii - xviii. Psychiatrist Rollo May's Love and Will, New York: W.W. Norton & Co. Inc., 1969, states: "Apathy is particularly important because of its close relation to love and will. Hate is not the opposite of love; apathy is. The opposite of will is not indecision - which actually may represent the struggle of the effort to decide, as in William James - but being uninvolved, detached, unrelated to the significant events." (p.29) We would argue, however, that the complexity of modern life may be the cause of apathy - since it is difficult enough to locate the problem in social ethics, let alone make decisions. In this connection the work of William Glasser, Reality Therapy, New York: Harper and Row, 1965, is an attempt in therapy to help persons to live responsibly within the limits of their situation, on the basis that we cannot fulfill the fundamental need to "feel that we are worthwhile to ourselves and to others" if we are not living responsibly. (p.9).

NOTES ON CHAPTER FIVE

93. R. Niebuhr, The Godly., p.132.
94. idem
95. ibid., p.133.
96. idem
97. ibid., p.134.
98. R. Niebuhr, The Nature and Destiny., Volume I, p.151.
99. ap., Bingham, p.117.
100. R. Niebuhr, The Godly., pp.135ff.
101. R. Niebuhr, The Nature and Destiny., Volume I, p.153.
102. R. Niebuhr, The Godly., p.136.
103. ibid., p.137.
104. ibid., p.140.
105. ibid., p.141.
106. idem
107. idem
108. ibid., pp. 142f.
109. ibid., pp.96f.
110. ap., D.G. Bloesch, The Christian Witness in a Secular Age, Minneapolis: Augsburg Publishing House, 1968, p.39.
111. Kegley & Bretall, (eds.), Reinhold Niebuhr., p.8.
112. R. Stone, Reinhold Niebuhr : Prophet., p.240.
113. R. Niebuhr, "The Problem of a Protestant Social Ethic", 1f.
114. ibid., 11.
115. D.B. Robertson, ed., Essays., p.249.
116. R. Niebuhr, Faith and Politics, p.61.
117. ibid., pp.38f.
118. R. Stone, "An Interview with Reinhold Niebuhr", Christianity and Crisis, 29 (March, 1969), 51.
119. R. Stone, Reinhold Niebuhr: Prophet., p.145.
120. R. Niebuhr, Faith and Politics, p.55.
121. D.B. Robertson, ed., Essays., pp.186f.
122. Kegley & Bretall, (eds.), Reinhold Niebuhr., p.249.
123. D.B. Robertson, ed., Essays., p.12.
124. All quotes from Niebuhr are in D.B. Robertson's introduction to Essays., p.14.

NOTES ON CHAPTER FIVE

125. A critical analysis of Lehmann's approach is given, inter alia, in Fletcher's Situation Ethics, in N.H.G. Robinson's The Groundwork for Christian Ethics, and in Paul Ramsey's Deeds and Rules in Christian Ethics.

126. See our discussion of Fletcher in Chapter One of this essay.

127. P. Berger, The Noise of Solemn Assemblies, New York: Doubleday paperback, 1961, p.150.

128. Cf. our discussion in Chapter Two of the various fellowships that Niebuhr belonged to.

129. R. Stone, "An Interview with Reinhold Niebuhr", 51f.

130. R. Niebuhr, Man's Nature and His., p.15.

131. D. Bloesch, The Christian Witness in a Secular Age, p.63 and p.69.

132. ap., Bingham, p.265.

133. R. Niebuhr, Christian Realism., p.201f.

134. Kegley and Bretall, (eds.), Reinhold Niebuhr., pp.216f.

135. R. Niebuhr, Christian Realism., p.187.

136. D. Bloesch, pp.31f.

137. H.R. Mackintosh, Types of Modern Theology, p.245.

138. ap. S. Langer, Philosophy in a New Key, p.4.

139. Kegley & Bretall, (eds.), Reinhold Niebuhr., pp.13f.

140. R. Niebuhr, Christian Realism., p.3.

141. R. Niebuhr, Faith and Politics., pp.62f.

142. Kegley and Bretall, (eds.), Reinhold Niebuhr., p.15.

143. R. Niebuhr, Christian Realism., p.5.

144. Kegley and Bretall, (eds.), Reinhold Niebuhr., pp.216f.

145. G. von Rad, p.89, p.93.

146. D.B. Robertson, ed., Essays., p.141, p.145.

147. I. Barbour, Science and Secularity, p.50.

148. Kegley and Bretall, (eds.), Reinhold Niebuhr., pp.225f.

149. ibid., pp.438f.

150. ibid., p.16.

151. ibid., p.9.

152. ap. R. Stone, Reinhold Niebuhr: Prophet., p.86.

153. R. Stone, p.91.

154. H.R. Weber, "The Bible: Contested and Contesting", Study Encounter, VI No.4. (1970), 175, 177.

155. "The Authority of the Bible", The Ecumenical Review, XXIII/4 (1971), 335 - 346.

NOTES ON CHAPTER FIVE

156. R. Niebuhr, The Nature and Destiny., Volume II, p.157.

157. Kegley & Bretall, (eds.), Reinhold Niebuhr., p.449.

158. R. Niebuhr, Faith and Politics, p.115.

159. W. Dray, pp. 107 - 109.

160. ibid., p.112.

161. ap., Dray, p.112.

162. H. Meyerhoff, pp. 312 - 313.

163. ibid., p.313.

164. R. Niebuhr, Faith and Politics, p.8.

165. ap., H. Meyerhoff, p.331.

166. P. Berger, The Sacred Canopy, New York: Doubleday & Co. 1967, pp.181f.

167. ibid., p.185.

168. R. Niebuhr, The Nature and Destiny., Volume II, p.65.

169. ibid., p.69.

170. ibid., pp.67f.

171. ibid., p.65.

172. R. Niebuhr, The Nature and Destiny., Volume I, p.151.

173. idem

174. I, Barbour, Science and Secularity, pp. 23, 27.

175. ibid., p.27.

176. W. Horden, Speaking of God, London: Epworth Press, 1964, pp.69 - 70. In the matter of the convictional nature of religious language, we refer to our discussion in Chapter One of the characteristic of religious language that it is couched in the language of personal relationships, and our discussion of the problem of the falsifiability of such language.

177. ap., Bingham, p.354.

178. H. Richard Niebuhr, The Meaning of Revelation, New York: The Macmillan Co. 1960, p.x.

179. ibid., pp. 18, 37.

180. R. Niebuhr, Christian Realism., p.203.

181. V. Lowe, Understanding Whitehead, Baltimore: John Hopkins Paperback, 1966, p.v.

182. R. Niebuhr, Does Civilization., p.11.

183. idem

184. V. Lowe, p.13.

185. I. Barbour, Science and Secularity, p.56.

186. J.S. Cumpsty, "The Resurrection of the Body", unpublished MS.

187. J.S. Steward, A Faith to Proclaim, London: Hoddler and Stoughton, 1953, p.106.

NOTES ON CHAPTER FIVE

188. ap., V. Lowe, p.188.

189. R. Stone, Reinhold Niebuhr: Prophet., p.100.

190. R. Niebuhr, The Nature and Destiny., Volume I, p.17.

191. R. Stone, Reinhold Niebuhr: Prophet., pp.100f.

192. J. Hick, p.280n.

193. ap., Religion and Culture edited by W. Leibrecht, London: SCM Press, 1959, p.135.

194. H.W. Richardson, Theology for a New World, London: SCM Press, 1968, pp. 123, 124.

195. H.W. Richardson, p.126.

196. R. Alves, Tomorrow's Child, p.189.

197. See R. Alves' Tomorrow's Child in which he argues that our civilization is determined by a triangle of interlocking power systems: the power of the sword, the power of money and the power of science. Social reality is created by the forms of power which have triumphed in the past, and our vision is controlled by the Establishment - the 'masters' of war, industry, and technology. His book is an attack on that 'realism' which lays down that the game of life shall be played by these masters. Alves believes that the 'absurdity' of our notion of reality must be challenged if a creative new tomorrow is to be born - we must dare to be utopians. We question whether any new tomorrow can be free of power or organization, without questioning the need for a vision which will enable man to achieve a better tomorrow which a responsible use of power, and of science and technology may help us to achieve.

BIBLIOGRAPHY

Alves, R. A Theology of Human Hope. Washington: Corpus Books, 1969

_____. Tomorrow's Child. London: SCM Press, 1972

Banton, M. ed. Anthropological Approaches to the Study of Religion. London: Tavistock Pub., 1966

Barbour I. Issues in Science and Religion. London: SCM Press, 1968

_____. Science and Secularity. Harper and Row, Publishers N.Y. 1970

_____. Earth Might Be Fair. N.J: Prentice-Hall, Inc., 1972

Barth, K. The Humanity of God. London: Collins, 1961

_____. Dogmatics in Outline. London: SCM Press, 1960. English translation by G.T. Thomson.

_____. Credo. London: Hodder & Stoughton, 1964

_____. Evangelical Theology: An Introduction. London: Collins, Fontana, 1965. English translation by G. Foley.

Beach, W. and H. Richard Niebuhr (eds.) Christian Ethics. New York: Ronald Press Co., 1955

Beattie, J. Other Cultures. London: Cohen & West, 1964

Bennett, J. "The Contribution of Reinhold Niebuhr", Union Seminary Quarterly Review, XXIV No. 1. Fall, 1968 .

Berger, P. The Noise of Solemn Assemblies. New York: Doubleday Paperback, 1961

_____. The Sacred Canopy. New York: Doubleday & Co., 1967

_____. A Rumour of Angels. New York: Doubleday Anchor Books, 1970

Bingham, J. Courage to Change. New York: Charles Scribner's Sons, 1961.

Bixler, J.S. et al The Nature of Religious Experience. New York: Harper and Bros., 1937

Blaikie, R.J. Secular Christianity and God Who Acts. Michigan: W.B. Eerdmans Pub. Co., 1970

Bloesch, D. The Christian Witness in a Secular Culture. Minneapolis: Augsburg Pub. House, 1968

Bonhoeffer, D. No Rusty Swords. London: Collins 1965

Braaten, C.E. History and Hermeneutics. London: Lutterworth Press 1968

Braybrooke, N. Teilhard de Chardin: Pilgrim of The Future. London: Darton, Longman & Todd, 1964

Casserley, J.V.L. The Christian in Philosophy. London: Faber & Faber Ltd., 1949

_____. Apologetics and Evangelism. London: A.R. Mowbray,1962

Cassirer, E. The Myth of the State. New Haven: Yale University Press, 1963

Childs, M. & Cater, D. Ethics in a Business Society. New York: Harper & Bros., 1954

BIBLIOGRAPHY

Copleston, F. A History of Philosophy. Vol. II. London: Burns & Dates Ltd., 1966

Coser, L.A. Masters of Sociological Thought. New York: Harcourt Brace Jovanovich, Inc., 1971

Cox, H. On Not Leaving It To the Snake. London: SCM Press, 1968

Cumpsty, J.S. "A Theological Interpretation of the Resurrection" (Unpublished MS.)

_____. "The Resurrection of the Body". (Unpublished MS.)

_____. Religion in the Dynamics of Freedom (University of Cape Town New Series No. 5,)1970

Dahl, M.E. The Resurrection of the Body. London: SCM Press 1962

Davies, D.R. Reinhold Niebuhr: Prophet from America. London: James Clarke & Co. Ltd., No date.

Davis,H.R. ed.Reinhold Niebuhr on Politics.

De Chardin, T. The Phenomenon of Man. London: Collins, 1959

_____. The Future of Man. Collins, Fontana Books, 1969

_____. Hymn of the Universe. London: Collins, Fontana Books, 1970.

De Lubac, H. Teilhard de Chardin : The Man and His Meaning. Mentor - Omega, 1965.

Dray, W. Philosophy of History. Englewood Cliffs: Prentice-Hall Inc., 1964.

Edwards, D. Religion and Change. London: Hodder & Stoughton, 1969

Ellul, J. The Meaning of the City. English Translation by Dennis Pardee, Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 1970

Fain, H. Between Philosophy and History. Princeton: P.U.P., 1970

Faith and Order Commission of World Council of Churches, "The Authority of the Bible", published in The Ecumenical Review XXIII/4, 1971, 335 - 346

Fletcher, J. Situation Ethics. London: SCM Press, 1966.

Flew, A. & Macintyre, A. New Essays in Philosophical Theology. London: SCM Press, 1955

Friedmann, G. The Anatomy of Work. London: Heineman,1961

Gerth, H.H. and Mills, C.W. From Max Weber. New York: OUP, 1958

Gilkey, L. Naming The Whirlwind: The Renewal of God-Language. New York: Bobbs-Merrill Co., 1969

_____. Religion and the Scientific Future. London: SCM Press, 1970

Glasser, W. Reality Therapy. New York: Harper & Row, 1965

Godsey, J.D. The Theology of Dietrich Bonhoeffer. London: SCM Press, 1960

Häring, B. "Dynamism and Continuity in a Personalistic Approach to Natural Law" in Norm and Context in Christian Ethics. London: SCM Press, 1969. Edited by G. Outka and P. Ramsey.

BIBLIOGRAPHY

Harnack, A. What is Christianity? London: Williams & Norgate, 3rd rev. ed., 1904

Harshbarger, L.H. & Mourant J.A. Judaism and Christianity. Boston: Allyn and Bacon, Inc., 1968

Harvey, Van. The Historian and the Believer. London: SCM Press, 1967

Hastings, J. ed. Encyclopedia of Religion and Ethics. New York: Charles Scribner's Sons, 1914.

Hefner, P. The Promise of Teilhard. New York: J.B. Lippincott Co., 1970.

Henderson, I. Myth in The New Testament. London: SCM Press, 1952

Hepburn, R. Christianity and Paradox. London: Watts, 1958

Herzberg, F. Work and the Nature of Man. London: Staples Press, 1968

Hick, J. Evil and the Love of God. London: Collins, Fontana, 1968

Horden, W. Speaking of God. London: Epworth Press, 1964

Hutchinson, J. Faith, Reason and Existence. New York: OUP, 1956

Jarrett-Kerr, M. The Secular Promise. London: SCM Press, 1964

Jenkins, D. Beyond Religion. London: SCM Press, 1962

Jordaan, P.J.J. Die Sosiale Probleme en taak van die Kerk in die Industriële Gebied. Cape Town: Tafelberg, 1971

Kegley, C.W. and Bretall, R. Eds. The Theology of Paul Tillich. New York: The Macmillan, 1961.

_____. The Theology of Emil Brunner. New York: The Macmillan Co., 1962

_____. Reinhold Niebuhr: His Religions, Social, and Political Thought. Library of Living Theology V.2. New York: The Macmillan Co., Paperback, 1965

Knoles, G.H. ed. The Responsibilities of Power 1900 - 1929. New York: The Free Press, Collier Ltd., 1967

Langer, S. Philosophy in a New Key. Cambridge, Mass.: Harvard University Press, 1960

Lehmann, P. Ethics in A Christian Context. London: SCM Press, 1963

Leibrecht, W. ed. Religion and Culture. London: SCM Press, 1968

Littell, F. The German Phoenix. New York: Doubleday, 1960

Lowe, V. Understanding Whitehead. Baltimore: John Hopkins Paperback, 1966

Macintyre, A. ed. Metaphysical Beliefs. London: SCM Press, 1957

Mackintosh, H.R. Types of Modern Theology. London: Collins, Fontana, 1964

Macquarrie, J. Twentieth Century Religious Thought. London: SCM Press, 1967

Mascall, E.L. The Openness of Being. London: Darton, Longman & Todd, 1971

BIBLIOGRAPHY

Marquard, L. The Peoples & Policies of South Africa. London: OUP, 1962

May, Rollo. Love and Will. New York: W.W. Norton & Co., Inc., 1969

Mayo, H.S. An Introduction to Democratic Theory. New York: OUP, 1960

Meyerhoff, H. ed. The Philosophy of History in our Time. New York: Doubleday Anchor Books, 1959

Miller, P. The Life of the Mind in America. London: Victor Gollancz, 1966

Moltmann, J. Theology of Hope. London: SCM Press, 1967

_____. Hope and Planning. London: SCM Press, 1971

Morris, R. & Greenleaf, W. United States of America: The History of a Nation Vol. II. Chicago: Rand McNally Co., 1969

Nicholls, W. Systematic and Philosophical Theology. Pelican, 1969

Niebuhr, H. Richard. The Meaning of Revelation. New York: The Macmillan Co., 1960

_____. The Social Sources of Denominationalism. New York: Meridian, 1964

Niebuhr, R. Does Civilization Need Religion? New York: Macmillan Co., 1941

_____. Leaves From the Notebook of a Tamed Cynic. New York: Living Age Books, Meridian, 1957

_____. Moral Man and Immoral Society. London: SCM Press, 1963

_____. Reflections on the End of an Era. New York: Charles Scribner's Sons, 1934

_____. An Interpretation of Christian Ethics. London: SCM Press, 1936

_____. Beyond Tragedy. London: Nisbet & Co., Ltd., 1938

_____. Christianity and Power Politics. New York: Charles Scribner's Sons, 1952.

_____. The Nature and Destiny of Man. London: Nisbet & Co. Ltd., 1941 2v

_____. The Children of Light and the Children of Darkness. New York: Scribner's Sons, 1944

_____. Discerning the Signs of the Times. London: Nisbet & Co. Ltd., 1946

_____. Faith and History. London: Nisbet & Co. Ltd., 1949

_____. The Godly and the Ungodly. London: Faber & Faber Ltd., 1949

_____. The Irony of American History. London: Nisbet & Co. Ltd., 1952.

_____. Christian Realism and Political Problems. New York: Charles Scribner's Sons, 1953

_____. The Self in the Dramas of History. London: Faber & Faber Ltd., 1956

_____. Man's Nature and His Communities. London: Geoffrey Bles, 1966

_____. Love and Justice, edited by D.B. Robertson. New York: Meridian, 1953 (Collected writings with introduction by D.B. Robertson).

BIBLIOGRAPHY

_____. Essays In Applied Christianity, ed. by D.B. Robertson. New York: Meridian, 1959. (Collected writings with introduction by D.B. Robertson).

_____. Reinhold Niebuhr On Politics, ed. by H.R. Davis and R.C. Good, New York: Charles Scribner's Sons, 1960 (Collected writings)

_____. Faith and Politics, ed. by R. Stone. New York: George Braziller, 1968. (Collected writings with intro. by R. Stone).

_____. "The Truth In Myths" in The Nature of Religious Experience, ed., by J.S. Bixler et al, Harper & Bros., 1937

_____. "Our Dependence Is On God" The Christian Century (Sep.1, 1954)

_____. "The Problem of a Protestant Social Ethic", Union Seminary Quarterly Review XV/1 (November, 1959)

_____. "Biblical Faith and Socialism: a Critical Appraisal", in Religion and Culture, ed. by W. Leibrecht. London: SCM Press, 1959

_____. "The Social Myths in the 'Cold War'", Journal of International Affairs, 21 (1967)

Niebuhr. Richard, R. The Resurrection and Historical Reason. New York: Charles Scribner's Sons, 1957

Outka G. & P. Ramsey, eds. Norm and Context in Christian Ethics. London: SCM Press, 1969

Oxford Dictionary of the Christian Church. London: OUP, 1958

Peerman, D. ed. Frontline Theology. London: SCM Press, 1967

Pelikan, J. Human Culture and The Holy. London: SCM Press, 1959

Popper, K. The Poverty of Historicism. London: Routledge & Kegan Paul, 1961 repr 1963

_____. The Open Society and Its Enemies 4th ed. London: Routledge & Kegan Paul, 1962, 2v

Radcliff-Brown, A.R. Structure and Function in Primitive Society. London: Cohen & West, 1952

Ramsey, I.T. Ed. Christian Ethics and Contemporary Philosophy. London: SCM Press, 1966

_____. Religious Language. London: SCM Press, 1967

Ramsey P. Deeds and Rules in Christian Ethics. Scottish Journal of Theology Occasional Papers No. II, Edinburgh: Oliver & Boyd, 1965

Rex, J. Key Problems of Sociological Theory. London: Routledge & Kegan Paul, 1961

Richardson, A. Christian Apologetics. London: SCM Press, 1947

Richardson, H.W. Theology for a New World. London: SCM Press, 1968

Roberts, D.E. Existentialism and Religious Belief. New York: OUP, 1959

Robertson, R. The Sociological Interpretation of Religion. Oxford: Basil Blackwell, 1970

Robinson, J.M. & Cobb, J.B. New Frontiers in Theology. New York: Harper & Row, 1967

Robinson J.A.T. The Body. London: SCM Press 1952

BIBLIOGRAPHY

_____. Honest to God. London: SCM Press, 1963

Robinson N.H.G. The Groundwork of Christian Ethics. London: Collins, 1971

Rowley, H.H. The Rediscovery of the Old Testament. London: James Clarke & Co., 1945.

Rümke, H.C. The Psychology of Unbelief. Rocksliff Press, 1952

Rust, E.C. Towards A Theological Understanding of History. New York: OUP, 1963.

Smart, J. Trans. Revolutionary Theology in The Making : Barth - Thurneysen Correspondence: 1914 - 1925. London: Epworth Press, 1964

Shaull, R. "Theology and The Transformation of Society" Theology Today, 25 (April, 1968)

Smith, H.L. Ethics and the New Medicine. New York: Abingdon Press, 1970

Stewart, J. A Faith to Proclaim. London: Hodder & Stoughton, 1953

Stone, R. "An Interview with Reinhold Niebuhr", Christianity and Crisis, 29 (March, 1969)

_____. Reinhold Niebuhr : Prophet to Politicians. New York: Abingdon Press, 1972

Symanowski, H. The Christian Witness in an Industrial Society. London: Collins, 1966

Torrence, T.F. Karl Barth (1910 - 1931). London: SCM Press, 1962

Towers, B. Teilhard de Chardin. London: The Carey Kingsgate Press Ltd., 1966

Vidler, A. The Church in an Age of Revolution. Penguin, 1961

Von Rad, G. The Message of the Prophets. London: SCM Press, 1968

Weber, H.R. "The Bible: Contested and Contesting", Study Encounter VI No.4., (1970)

Wilson, B. Religion in Secular Society. London: C.A. Watts, 1966

Wright, G.E. and Fuller R. The Book of the Acts of God. Penguin Books, 1965

Wright, G.E. The Old Testament Against its Environment. London: SCM Press, 1950

Zahrnt, H. The Question of God. New York: Harcourt Brace: Jovanovich, Inc., 1969 English translation by R.A. Wilson.